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Mustang Merle's Mandate.

BY MAJOR SAM S. SCOTT.



THE FIERCE BIRDS SWOOPED DOWN BUT THE BRAVE LARRY DROVE THEM BACK WITH HIS LASSO.

Mustang Merle's Mandate;

OR,

WIPING OUT the WAR SADDLES.

A Romance of the Rio Tagus.

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("THE OLD MAJOR,")

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CHAPTER I.

THE MIDNIGHT MAZEPPAS.

A CLEAR, starry night in midsummer.

A light breeze stirs the long grass of a wide plain, and passing over it, ripples the starlit waters of the Rio Tagus.

From the mouth of a gulch, which is not far from the scene of the night wind's dalliance, ride a band of determined looking men, led by one who looks like a veritable bandit.

He is a bandit, in truth—no less a person than Prince Pedro, the man most feared by the ranchers of the Southwest, as well as by all who have occasion to pass through the country.

"Where did you say you thought we would strike the train?" he asks of the man riding at his side.

"The camp, when I left it, was at the east end of the Long Gulch. It is not watched at all, as the man who runs it says he has no fears of Prince Pedro."

"Ah, well, we shall see," and the Prince stroked his long mustache. "He is not the first fool who has ventured into my domain. At the east end of the Long Gulch, eh? We have a good long ride yet. Come, Oriole Bill; give us another song. Don't be afraid; no one will hear you but the War Saddles. Tune up and let us have something new."

The man addressed as Oriole Bill is a person of not more than twenty, and, but for a scar across his cheek, would have been accounted handsome.

"A song! a song!" cry half a dozen other men, whereupon the singer of the band at once begins:

"Oh, we're the boys who ride by night
And never lose our prey;
We lift our hands and strike, and smite,
Then gallop fast away.
A wild and merry life is ours,
We never stop to love;
We leap the stream, we crush the flow'rs,
For hawks will kill the dove.

"They hunt us, but they never find,
For midnight wraiths are we;
We never leave a trail behind
For any one to see.
The sharpest fox that scours the plain,
The eagle in the sky
Would hunt Prince Pedro's band in vain,
So baffle we the spy.

"Beware! beware! we're out again!
A camp is now our spoil;
And like the roses of the plain,
We spin not, nay, nor toil.
Three cheers, three cheers for Pedro's band,
The coolest, bravest, best!
We are the terrors of this land—
The Invincibles of the West!

CHORUS:—"Hurrah, hurrah, for Pedro's band,
The terror of the plain!
We're masters of this sunny land—
The ranchers hunt in vain!"

A loud shout, accompanied by an enthusiastic clapping of hands followed the song, and those nearest the singer patted him on the back.

"Well done, Bill," complimented Prince Pedro. "You must spend your leisure getting up new songs. That is the best one yet. If the girl in the camp at the end of Long Gulch is as pretty as you say, you must give her a taste of your lyric abilities. Come, now. Let's have a little gallop in earnest."

Away went the whole troop, and in a short time their steeds had crossed the plain and were bearing them over a rougher country.

Half an hour later the gallop dwindled into a cautious walk, and a man who had been sent ahead returned and said something in low tones to the leader.

"All asleep, eh?" repeated the Prince.

"Asleep and without a guard."

"The fool! He doesn't care a snap for us."

A brief halt was made, but the band soon moved on again. It was now to be seen that an attack of some kind was intended, for the

brigands did not speak and kept a little apart, so that their accouterments would not touch and betray their presence.

It was true that a camp of travelers lay not far off. At the end of a gulch were two wagons which seemed to have been placed for the night.

A number of horses, hobbled so that they could not stray far, were to be seen here and there nibbling the succulent herbage that grew to the very mouth of the gulch. Everything about the little encampment was still and its occupants were fast asleep, or seemed to be.

Prince Pedro, the scourge of the Tagus, rode forward and drew rein at the very fringe of the camp.

A smile overspread his swarthy face.

"In which wagon is the beauty?" he asked a man who came to his side.

"I cannot tell you that, captain. You must remember that I did not stay till they made arrangements for retiring. I think, however, she will be found in the nearest one. I am quite sure that is the one she rode in to-day."

"All right, Dick. We shall soon see."

The bandits had ridden close to the doomed camp and were awaiting the signal heard so often from the lips of their leader.

All at once it sounded—a singular cry like that from the throat of a certain night bird of the region. The scourges moved forward, and the following moment had burst upon the camp with yells.

In an instant there were answering cries and men were seen to spring out of the two wagons.

"Surrender!" cried Prince Pedro. "We are ten to one and you have played fool by sleeping without a guard, in this country."

The attack was over almost as quickly as it was made.

But the victory had not been accomplished without some confusion.

Half a dozen shots had been fired, and two men who belonged to the camp were stretched on the ground.

Prince Pedro rode to one of the wagons and lifted the side curtain.

"Hands down there!" cried a stern voice, and the handsome bandit turned to see himself covered by a revolver in the hand of a man who stood a few feet away.

"That wagon contains my niece, and you shall not insult her."

"Watch that man," ordered Pedro. "If he attempts anything foolish, shoot him down." And the chief again turned to the wagon and lifted the curtain.

"There's no girl here," he said in tones of disappointment.

The spy known as Dick ran to his side.

"She was in the wagon to-day. I saw her myself," he exclaimed.

"But she is not here now, I say. Look for yourself," and Prince Pedro's face grew dark.

Dick looked into the wagon and then shook his head.

"Not there now; that's certain."

Pedro whirled and came toward the man who had ordered him to drop the curtain.

"Where is that niece of yours?" he demanded.

"If she is not in yon wagon I cannot answer you."

"She is not there. Here, boys; bring out your straps. We will see what these people know. The girl has been sent away."

It did not take long for the War Saddles to produce cords which they shook in the prisoners' faces.

But two men of the camp were living; the men shot by the War Saddles were already dead.

One of the prisoners was a man of five and forty with a handsome face. The other was not yet twenty, good-looking and well-clad. He looked like a young eagle as he stood before the bandits of the plains, his figure drawn to its true height and his breast swelling with indignation.

"Where is the girl?" demanded the Prince, addressing the elder captive.

"I do not know."

In an instant he turned to the younger of the pair.

"Are you going to follow with a lie?" he asked.

For a second there was no reply.

"If I knew I would not tell you," the young man retorted.

"By Jove, that is coolness! See here! Do you know who I am?"

"I have never seen you before, but I should call you Prince Pedro, the yellow cur of the plains."

The eyes of the marauder chief seemed to emit sparks of fire.

"I am Prince Pedro!" he roared. "You have yet to know me, young man."

"To have heard of you is enough."

There was no reply by the bandit, but Pedro turned to his men. In a little while the wagons had been plundered. Everything that caught the eyes of the freebooters was taken, and when the looting had been done the men came up to their leader and waited for instructions.

"We shall have two Mazeppas to-night," he announced, with a fiendish grin. "I have selected the horses. There are two in the teams that fill the bill. Go to work."

Twenty minutes later an inhuman deed had been done.

The man and the youth—Abner Nevins and Larry Blair—had been lashed at full length on the backs of two of the youngest and wildest horses of the teams and were awaiting the signal which seemed to tremble on Prince Pedro's lips.

"Won't you give up the secret?" asked the bandit for the last time.

"No."

"Let them go!"

Away dashed the horses. At the same time some one applied a match to the wagons and a spear of flame shot heavenward, and in a short time there was nothing to show where the little camp had been but a heap of coals.

The two Mazeppas of the Southwest had disappeared.

CHAPTER II.

THE "GHOST" JOE BUNDY SAW.

"I KNOW a genuine ghost when I see one. Didn't I used to see 'em whar I came from, an hev'n't I had many a tussle with 'em—tussles enough ter make one's ha'r stand on end? But look yonder. That's a fire whar started up since we crossed the ridge."

The speaker was a tall lank specimen of the genus Yankee and he addressed a companion who stood at his side and was looking, like himself, at a bright light which told that a large fire was beyond the ridge at their back.

The Yankee was Joe Bundy, a character not unknown to the readers of this Library, and his companion was a fine-looking young Indian.

The red-skin looked toward the light some time in silence.

"If the light war a little bigger it would enable us to see the ghost," continued Joe. "I'm as sartain that I saw one as I am that I am the last representative of the Bundys, a family worth belongin' to if I do say it myself. Shall we go over to the fire, or look for the spook awhile longer?"

"The ghost," responded Red Hawk, promptly.

The pair started off again, led by Joe, who was confident that he had seen a genuine ghost.

The two friends were out on a night hunt for lost horses belonging to Mesquite Ranch and were returning without their game when the figure called a genuine ghost by Joe was sighted.

The old man had fallen back with a cry of terror and when he recovered he asserted that he had seen a spirit, and at the same time crying out that he did not fear such things, bounded after it. But it had eluded them, and now they stood baffled by a strange adventure.

"Thar it is ag'in!" suddenly exclaimed the Yankee, springing forward and plunging into a gulch at the top of his speed. "It sha'n't escape me this time!"

Red Hawk followed and soon came up with Joe holding in his arms not a ghost, but the fainting form of a beautiful young girl into whose face the young Apache gazed with intense curiosity.

"Don't this beat all the spook-catching you ever heard of, Red Hawk?" ejaculated Joe. "Ain't she a beauty? Never saw her afore, eh, chief?"

The Indian shook his head.

"I think she must have been walking in her sleep," continued Joe, looking down at his charge. "She came toward me with her eyes wide open, yet she didn't appear to see me. What is it you call these kind o' people. It's a big name that I never could get the hang of. Well, never mind. That's what she is."

Red Hawk sprung away and in a little while had returned, bearing in his double hands some water which he sprinkled over the fair white face in Old Joe's arms.

The effect was magical, for in a moment, as it were, the closed eyes had opened again and were staring at the two pards.

"Where am I?" was the first question asked by the sleep-walker.

"Safe with friends, but strangers," said Joe. "I am the last of the Bundys and this is Red Hawk, the best young Indian out o' doors."

"But this is not my uncle's camp at the mouth of the gulch?"

"Of course it is not. This is Rolling Stone Hollow and if you mean Long Gulch, you have walked about two mile from thar."

"Long Gulch! That is the place where we had camped."

Joe and Red Hawk exchanged hasty looks; the fire they had seen was in that direction.

"I am subject to fits of sleep-walking," continued the girl, with a sigh. "I must have crept from my couch in the wagon and left camp. Take me back before they miss me."

"I'm afraid—"

Old Joe stopped and looked toward the far-away gulch.

He motioned to Red Hawk who bounded away and in a second had disappeared.

"My name is Nelly Nevins and I am going West with my uncle Abner, and one or two others. We have had very nice traveling thus far. We were warned to look out for robbers who are said to infest this country, but as yet we have seen nothing of such people. Some years ago my uncle had an enemy who carried in his breast a secret of his life which Uncle Abner wanted to get hold of, and hearing that this man was somewhere beyond the Tagus, he resolved to look for him. As I am under his care and did not want to remain at home alone, I decided to come along. Larry is with us."

The manner in which she spoke the last sentence drew a smile from the last of the Bundys.

"Larry's a friend, I suppose?"

Nelly blushed.

"Yes, I know he is, so don't tell me any more," said Joe. "I'll bet my head that Larry is one of the best fellows out of doors. Red Hawk has gone ahead to prepare 'em for your comin', so we'll move back."

Nelly Nevins talked freely of herself while the old "Yank" led her back over the ground which she had traversed in a somnambulistic state.

He feared the worst, but did not tell his young charge. He knew that Prince Pedro, the successor of Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick, had become the terror of the region, and expected to have a bad report from Red Hawk, the Apache.

The fire by this time no longer lit up the horizon and Old Joe rightly concluded that it had died down for want of fuel; but he kept the trail to Long Gulch until halted by the Indian who appeared suddenly to him and his charge.

"I'm sorry, miss, but we had better go back to Mesquite," announced Old Joe.

"No! I must go back to the camp!"

An expression of sympathy crossed the old scout's face.

"But, thar's no camp thar, now!" he blurted out. "It is gone up in fire!"

In an instant the face of the waif grew deathly white.

"No camp? Gone up in fire? Oh! oh!"

The long arm of Old Joe reached out and caught her as she reeled back; but Nelly Nevins did not faint.

"Tell me all," she said, looking at Red Hawk. "The worst has happened. I am worse than orphaned."

"The wagons have been burned," answered the Indian. "The fire has eaten up everything."

"Did your people do it?"

"No. It was the work of the War Saddles," the young Indian responded.

"He means Prince Pedro and his band," explained Old Joe. "I think we will take the war-path now, in dead earnest. Merle will be eager for the fray and, then, we haven't had a fair chance to cross swords with this yaller vulture yet, who ought to be swooped in without mercy!"

Nelly insisted on being conducted to the destroyed camp and was humored by her newly found friends. The ruins of the wagons were found; also the bodies of the two men killed by the rover raiders.

Nelly examined these herself and turned to Joe and Red Hawk with a sigh of relief.

"Larry and my uncle are still alive and that is a good deal. Does Prince Pedro kill his prisoners?"

"He is devil enough to do anything, but it is likely that they have 'taken a ride'."

There was a meaning to Old Joe's words which only Red Hawk comprehended. Nelly looked at the Yankee, but did not fully understand.

"To Mesquite now," said Joe.

"Will your friend Merle take up the trail?" she asked eagerly.

"I promise that this is just the excuse we've been waiting for."

"To Mesquite, then!" cried Nelly Nevins, with sudden energy.

It was a somewhat tedious trip, but the young girl did not lose hope nor exhibit the least signs of fatigue. The ranch of the boy nabob was nearer than she thought, and at last a signal from Old Joe brought a man from one of the stables and in another minute the little party stood on Mustang Merle's porch.

The return of the horse-hunters with a young girl instead of the lost animals drew a crowd of ranch hands to the dwelling and Old Joe told the story he had to tell.

Curses loud and deep were heard on every side, and a thousand anathemas were showered upon the heads of Prince Pedro and his War Saddles.

"Remember that without Uncle Abner and Larry I am alone in the world," cried the fair girl, stretching out her hands in pleading gesture. "I will go with you. There is fighting blood in my veins. I am eager to force Prince Pedro to give up his captives and to make him pay for this night's work."

"We'll have to do some hard riding to overtake the two Mazeppas," said a voice near Nelly Nevins.

In an instant the girl had turned upon the speaker.

"Merciful heavens! do you mean to say that the robber lashed his prisoners to the backs of horses and sent them adrift?" she exclaimed.

There was no reply, for the man who could not hold his tongue had dipped his head and slunk away.

"If that is true they are lost forever! They will perish somewhere of hunger and thirst, and the vultures will pick their eyes out before life leaves their bodies!"

The horror of the picture she had painted rushed across Nelly's mind with ten-fold awfulness.

"Lost! lost!" and she fell swooning in the always-ready arms of the last of the Bundys.

Old Joe, his eyes on fire, looked at his young master.

"We've got ter hurt somebody for this," he said, and Mustang Merle made instant reply.

"Yes. Now let Prince Pedro look out! Vengeance must be ours, my men!"

CHAPTER III.

THE TORTURES OF THE DESERT.

THE two steeds that carried Abner Nevins and Larry Blair from the camp at the end of the gulch had been united in a manner by the bandits. A line passed from one to the other, so that it was impossible for them to become separated, and thus strangejy united the two companions were carried out into the night and soon had the camp far behind them.

For some time nothing was said by either of the Mazeppas.

The frightened horses bore them on and on, and now and then seemed on the eve of breaking the cord in their efforts to get away from one another.

"This is the work of a devil incarnate," said Nevins, when the two steeds had come together so as to let them converse.

"I have always heard that Prince Pedro, as he calls himself, is capable of anything," was the reply. "Oh, if we had but set a guard, but I did not know we were in his domain. In heaven's name, what has become of Nelly?"

"The fate of the girl is what troubles me. She must have wandered off in one of her strange naps. While she has escaped the clutches of Prince Pedro, she is liable to fall into those of a roving band of Indians, even if she avoids the teeth of wolves. Our horses never carried such loads before. We are doomed to some terrible death which the coming day may reveal."

The youth said nothing for a spell.

On, on went the two steeds, seeming to be as fresh as when they started with their bound riders.

"Why can't they break the ropes?" suddenly asked Nevins.

"That would separate us," was the reply.

"As for me, I don't want to lose you."

"You are right, boy. Let us suffer and die together!"

Morning came at last, and the exhausted men looked around upon a new country which was full of strange sights to them. They were on the borders of a plain across which they could not look. It appeared as illimitable as the ocean itself, and here and there stood a little grove of trees.

"That must be the Waterless Plain," said Nevins. "We were told to avoid it, you know."

"Yes; but fate directs our horses on this horrible journey."

The steeds, instead of turning aside from the outlook which lay before them, went toward the plain, and to their riders' horror passed on into the terrible waste.

The sun came up and beat upon the upturned faces of the two Mazeppas.

"Death! death!" cried Nevins.

"Life! Life for vengeance!" responded

Larry Blair. "Heaven spare me for that!"

By and by the horses felt the effects of the heat and the glitter of the sand. They checked their speed and staggered along like animals about to sink to the ground.

Horrible looking lizards crawled at their feet, and now and then a rattlesnake would send forth its rattle in their path.

"You will live, Larry," said Nevins, at last.

"I am not to come out of this journey alive. I have told you about the man who holds the secret which lured me upon this trip. You will hunt him down. He knows the truth about the birth of the girl I have lost. He knows when Nelly's mother was married, and perhaps what finally became of her. The poor woman, driven almost to her death by the persecutions of a wretch, vanished from her home one night, and, leaving the babe in the cradle, crossed the Ohio and disappeared. We tracked her to the water's edge, but there all trace of her was lost. It was supposed by some that she threw herself into the stream, but I do not believe it. She came South. I once saw a man who ran across a woman somewhere in this country who resembled her, but she had changed and was, when he saw her, a queen of crime and wickedness."

"Larry, my boy, when you escape from this living death, as something tells me you will, you will take up the trail where I leave it. You will make Prince Pedro pay for this, his crowning piece of villainy—"

"I swear it, Nevins!" broke in the youth.

"No oath is needed, for I know you will not let him escape. Why should he hunt us out? How did he know that we had Nelly with us, for, don't you recollect, the first thing he did was to go to the wagon where the girl slept and lift the curtain to see if she were there? That man knew she was with us, I say."

"He must have known it."

Nevins made no reply for a moment.

"I would give ten thousand dollars for a drop of water," he said when he spoke again. "I am afire within and my vitals are burning up."

Half an hour later when he looked at Nevins he saw a wild glare in his eyes and heard a feeble groan which told him that death was not far off.

Overhead he saw something which the glazed eyes of Nelly's uncle could not make out. These were moving specks in the heavens; they came nearer and showed that they had beak, wings and talons!

"The vultures of the Waterless Plain!" murmured Larry. "Death is not far off when they flock to the feast."

The horses were now trying to escape from the multitude of wings. They were straining every nerve to get beyond the power of the swarming birds, but each succeeding moment only showed how hopeless were their efforts.

Presently one of the steeds staggered and fell. He dragged the other animal down with him and both lay panting in the shade of a bunch of cacti, where the shadows were as hot as the sunburnt sand.

Larry Blair in falling with the horse that carried him saw that the cords around him had been overstrained and loosened.

A ray of hope flashed through his brain. He turned and began to tug at the cord with all the strength he had left. It seemed that he had summoned to his rescue supernatural powers, for all at once he withdrew one hand, then another and at last staggered to his feet, free!

In another instant he had sprung to Nevins' side.

"Too late!" cried the young man. "It is all over with poor Nevins, and he will never solve the secret!"

The fierce birds swooped down but the brave Larry drove them back long enough to note that Nevins was dead. Stripping the heavy cords from his steed, he fought off the vultures and plied the cords with such effect that they were glad to lift their loathsome bodies into the higher air.

Almost dead, Larry Blair proceeded to bury Nevins in the desert. He easily made a hole in the sand and placed the body therein, and

when this had been done, stood erect and swore over the grave a terrible oath of revenge.

But, he was still in the direst peril. The blood of one of the horses quenched his raging thirst for the time, and in a little while he was moving through the sands afoot. His brain seemed on fire. Indeed he hardly knew which way he was going, but the long, dark line beyond one side of the desert showed him where the hills were and for them he steered.

The awful trip seemed interminable, but the brave youth bore up under the strain until he crossed the boundary of the waste, and sunk exhausted at the brink of a muddy pool which he found at the foot of the hills.

He drank and drank until he could swallow no more. The snake-infested pool was to him the waters of life. He raved and danced, then sunk down and drank again.

Wherever he crawled he wrote one word on rock and tree.

With a bit of red stone, which he had picked up near the pool, he wrote "Revenge" wherever he went.

The sun went down the western fields of the hot sky. Like a great ball of fire it was dipping below the horizon when Larry Blair stood on a large flat rock on one of the elevated trails which overlooked a valley from which he had emerged and broke out into a strange song. The notes floated far and wide, and birds stopped their songs to wonder who their rival was.

All at once an arrow passed so close to the singer's head that he checked his song and looked around. He saw the arrow sticking in a tree at his back.

The next moment he had pulled it out and was looking at it. The Indian, who had crawled close to him, was fitting another to his bow and was about to fire when Larry detected the red marksman.

Instead of falling back among the bushes or sheltering himself behind the tree, he bounded at the Indian with a tigerish yell!

The red-skin stopped long enough to discharge another shaft, but the arrow missed its mark, and in a second the savage was in full flight.

The powers of the insane were in Larry Blair's limbs. He cleared rocks at a bound, and after a run of half a mile threw himself upon the Indian and wrested his knife from his grip.

"I am the king of this region! My mission is to kill everything that has life!" cried the demented Larry, and he threw the Indian down and was about to plunge the knife into his breast when something struck him on the head.

Larry staggered to his feet, only to pitch headlong across the body of his enemy.

"A white man, is it?" said a voice, and the Indian, still trembling over his narrow escape, looked at the speaker.

"White man and mad as a wolf," the savage replied.

The next instant, the person who had struck Larry bent over him and felt his pulse.

"This man isn't dead yet, Orallano. Go and bring up my horse."

The Indian, with a glance at Larry, turned and walked off, while the hand of the Queen of the Hills went back to the faint pulse it had left a moment before.

"This is fate," she murmured. "Ay, fate and—death!"

CHAPTER IV.

"TIGER FOOT."

FOR some time Mustang Merle, the young owner of Mesquite Ranch, had been "aching," as the saying is, to get a chance to have a brush with Prince Pedro, the yellow chief of the War Saddles.

It seemed that the opportunity had come, for he resolved to take up Nelly Nevins's cause, and hunt the Rover Raiders of the Tagus down with his band of adherents, chief among whom were Joe Bundy and Red Hawk, the young Apache.

Prince Pedro had no regular abiding place. He was to be found here and there, but most of the time in the saddle surrounded by his desperadoes, though it was known that some of the booty which they looted from the rich ranches was hidden in the caverns to be found in the hilly country west of the Tagus.

The fate of Nevins and Larry Blair was unknown at Mesquite, and Merle decided to send out Red Hawk and Bundy to look for the trail of the two Mazeppas.

Yankee and Indian were ready for any adventure, and the morning after the arrival of Nelly at the ranch, these two trusty pards rode from the corral, and turned their faces toward the scene of the surprise.

As for Merle, he had another plan in view;

but saying nothing to any one, he saddled his own horse and rode quietly away.

"We will find the nest of the vultures and then we will attack them," he said to himself. "I propose to make it a war of extermination. This, and a lesson to all border brigands, that the end to their devilish work and career, on this side of the Rio Grande, has come!"

The day after these events, a horse looking quite unlike the majestic animal ridden from Mesquite by Merle might have been seen moving down a narrow trail near the edge of the Waterless Plain.

Indians were not a rarity in that region, and the person who rode the horse we have just seen was a young red-skin who sat his steed with the grace of a Centaur.

The animal turned into another trail at last and was brought under the shadow of a rocky wall which rose nearly five hundred feet above him.

The rider, though he knew it not at the time, was being watched by a pair of very keen eyes, and when he had passed on, the owner of the eyes was also on the move.

Ten minutes later the young red was halted by a stern command, and leaning eagerly forward, he fixed his eyes upon a man who had ridden into his path and who now sat bolt upright in his saddle with his fingers at the trigger of a rifle.

"Why don't you come on, you young red?"

The Indian rode forward, keeping his eyes riveted on the speaker, and came to a halt a few feet from where he sat.

"Out riding for your health?" queried the white man, who wore the usual garb of the border, with a belt that showed the butts of two revolvers, besides the horn hilt of a bowie.

"Tiger Foot is riding," said the Indian.

"For yer health, of course. By the way, did you see anything of two horses tied together and carrying two men on 'em?"

Tiger Foot shook his head.

"Maybe they didn't cross yer path," laughed the white man. "We came down on a camp last night and give the two big bugs in it a free ride, as we do sometimes."

"Which way?" asked the Indian.

"The last we saw of them they were headed for the Waterless Plain. I reckon they've struck it ere this an' know what it is to keep their mouths shut when they were asked to tell Prince Pedro the truth!"

"The White Vulture knows how to send his enemies to death!"

The Indian had spoken the name by which Prince Pedro was known among the Comanches, and the man before him, one of the White Vulture's band, laughed immoderately.

"Don't be, though?" he exclaimed. "He's over there now."

The outlaw pointed as he spoke to a conical hill, which was said to be hollow.

Tiger Foot looked away and seemed to smile.

"Mebbe you'd like ter see Prince Pedro?" continued the War Saddle. Just ride over and enter the camp. The boys' play-hour has come, and they'd like to see you."

But Tiger Foot shook his head.

"I'll go with you," said the white man a moment later. "I haven't anything to do here, and, then, I'd like to show you something no red person has ever seen. I guess the captain won't object."

In a little while the Indian and his guide were riding toward the hill and before long had entered a camp of dark-skinned men some of whom were gambling on the ground, while others were grooming their horses.

"Captain Pedro?" called the pard, and a handsome man of Spanish descent arose and came forward. "This is Tiger Foot, a young Comanche buck that I picked up in the mountain back yonder, and I told him that I would show him something none of our red friends ever saw if you hadn't any objection."

"Do you mean the old chamber?"

"Yes."

Prince Pedro looked for a moment at the Indian and then said:

"I prefer to show him myself, Nickajack."

"All right. Here's your man, and I'm sure you will find him a good looker."

Prince Pedro started off with the Indian youth at his heels, for the horse had been turned over to the care of a tough of the band.

The captain of the War Saddles led his visitor to one side of the hill where bushes grew in profusion, and parting them showed him the entrance to the cavern.

Tiger Foot stepped in after Prince Pedro who struck a light near the entrance and held it above his head. For some time the twain seemed to descend into the very bowels of the earth,

when the descent stopped all at once and the tunnel went straight ahead.

"How did you leave old Leopard Robe?" suddenly asked Prince Pedro.

"Well," sententiously answered the young red-skin.

"And Eagle Claw?"

"Still nursing his broken leg."

"Those two reds are friends of mine," said Prince Pedro with a malicious grin which did not entirely confirm his words. "Ah, here we are."

It had been said in certain quarters that months before the opening of our present story Prince Pedro had entered into a treaty with the Comanches; that the chiefs of that tribe were to afford him a safe asylum if he was ever hard pressed by enemies, and on several occasions they had befriended him in a manner which went far toward confirming the rumors of an alliance.

This is why Prince Pedro felt that he could trust the young red-skin whom he had brought to the secret cavern in the hill. If he had had any doubts concerning Tiger Foot's identity his last answers had removed them.

The room to which Prince Pedro had conducted Tiger Foot was quite large, and the store-house of a vast amount of booty. The floor was littered with rich equipments of every description. There were gilt bridles and laced saddles, taken from ranches plundered by the desperado band, and in one corner were a lot of gaudy garments, which at one time must have hung in the wardrobe of some nabob's hacienda.

"Look at the spoil," said Pedro, turning to Tiger Foot. "It is worth as much as the wealth of some old king across the water. Here, this is yours," and he picked from the floor a beautiful whip, which had a golden handle, and extended it to the young Indian.

"You can whip your horse with a senorita's whip," he laughed.

Tiger Foot took the whip and handled it playfully.

"What if the white ranchers should find this?" he said.

"They never will. I mean that the discovery would do them no good," hastily corrected Prince Pedro. "I have everything ready to blow the hill to the sky."

"How?"

The bandit took the light and carried it close along one of the walls of the room, followed by the sharp eyes of the young red. He pointed out a slender wire, which after running along the wall some distance, lost itself in the darkness.

"That is a secret which I impart to no one," he said, looking at Tiger Foot. "I will not tell you how very safe my treasures are. They will never fall into the hands of the enemy. Just as the hand was extended to seize them, the whole would be blown sky-high. So much for the cunning of my people, Tiger Foot. Ha, ha! I guess we beat you Indians at some things."

For some time Tiger Foot remained underground, looking at the stolen wonders of Prince Pedro's treasure-house.

When he emerged into the light he found the camp as before, and looked proudly at the whip the bandit prince had given him.

For several hours he lounged about the camp. He played with the War Saddles, for a Comanche knows the tricks of his whiter brethren. He showed them how he could jump, and did some other things which captured their good intentions.

The shades of evening fell at last.

Tiger Foot told Prince Pedro that he would ride back.

"What shall Tiger Foot say to the chiefs of his tribe?" he asked.

"Tell them that I have sent two more Mazeppas toward the Waterless Plains," laughed the bandit. "But don't kiss old Eagle Claw for me!"

Five minutes after the red-skin's departure Oriole Bill, the singer of the camp, came over to where Prince Pedro stood, and said something in a low tone.

"What, that Indian no red at all, but Mustang Merle, the boy owner of Mesquite Ranch?" cried Pedro. "It is false! Tell another lie like that, and by heavens! I'll hang you up by the ears for the vultures!"

But, somehow or other, the look Oriole Bill gave him when he slunk away, seemed to haunt the captain of the War Saddles.

CHAPTER V.

THE HUNT FOR THE LOST.

MEANTIME Joe Bundy and Red Hawk, the young Apache, were looking for the trail of the two Mazeppas.

They struck the trail of the frightened steeds at the confines of the destroyed camp at the end of the gulch and followed it to the edge of the Waterless Plain.

"If they struck out over that desert they are lost," said the old scout to his companion, and Red Hawk shook his head.

The horses of the pair seemed to shrink from entering upon a hunt on the waste, as if they knew something of the dangers that lurked among its shining sands; but Joe and Red Hawk had not reached that stage of the trail to turn back and in a little while they were moving across the open.

Now and then the trail became lost entirely, but the keen eyes of the friends would pick it up again, and at length they drew rein at two heaps of well-picked bones which told them that the horses had perished.

"But what became of Nevins and the boy?" exclaimed the Yankee. "I don't see anything of them and I know dead men don't bury themselves in this accursed country."

Red Hawk smiled and fell to examining the ground.

"Look!" he suddenly cried. "One went back; only one, white brother."

"By hokey! you are right, chief, as you always are. One went back over the waste. The other stayed."

The grave of Nevins was next found, after which the two trailers turned their faces toward the distant hills and followed Larry Blair's footsteps until they lost them among the shadows and trails beyond the plain.

Trailing was no new occupation to the two men, and, besides, they knew the country to which their present trail led them; but somehow or other they did not meet with the success they anticipated, for they again lost the track among the hills, and were on the point of despairing when Red Hawk suddenly came upon the marks of hoofs, and both stopped.

The day had worn away by this time, and night once more had thrown her sable curtain over the scene.

"Somewhere in this region dwells the strange beauty we saw last summer—the Hermit Queen, as they call her," said Old Joe.

"The woman with the black eyes that can look one through?"

"Yes."

"White brother, who is that woman?"

"That puzzles me as well as others," said Bundy. "We don't know who she is, nor why she hides in these hills and has Indians for her companions when she is not beating the toughs of Tagus and the other camps out of their dust. Juanita is a deep puzzle. Merle once ran across her and invited her to Mesquite; but she has never come."

They followed the tracks of hoofs until they became lost among the rocks, when Old Joe stopped and listened.

"What is it?" asked the watchful Red Hawk.

The answer was a quick recoil on Joe's part and the young Indian felt himself seized and pulled back.

"Not a word!" was breathed in his ear and the next moment the two pards stood like pillars of stone at one side of the trail.

"Go straight ahead, Oralano," said the woman's voice. "I am at your heels."

"Oralano can see like the owl after dark."

"We're gone if the red can do that," muttered Joe.

The next instant two forms barely discernible came into view. Both were afoot, but one led a horse and with one hand seemed to be holding a human body on the saddle. The foremost person was an Indian, the other a woman, and in a jiffy they had passed the motionless watchers.

"Tis the Hermit Queen," said Joe in a whisper. "The other is a young Comanche who is said to be her husband. Wait; don't follow them just yet."

He had thrown back his hand to restrain the eager Indian at his elbow.

"Juanita was holding some one in the saddle. I could not see whether the rider of the horse was dead or alive. Something mysterious is up."

The forms of the woman and her guide had disappeared by this time, and slowly Joe and Red Hawk moved forward and were soon at her heels.

"If she sees us the jig is up," said the Yankee to his companion. "We must be almighty cautious not to let that woman's eyes alight upon us to night. She shoots at the drop of the hat, I say, and from the way she acts she seems to be mad at times. I don't want to stop one of her bullets and thus terminate the famous Bundy family. Not jes' yet, Red Hawk."

Juanita, the Hermit Queen, led the trailers down the hilly path to the valley below. There she stopped and dismissed the Indian.

"I will take him on," she said. "You may go back to the work I have assigned to you. Come to me when you have accomplished it. From what I have got of the man in the saddle he had a companion when he came into this region; they were captured and Mazeppied by that rascal of rascals, Prince Pedro, and sent across the plains on frightened steeds. Go back and find the trail. Discover what became of the other one."

The woman's words were wafted to the listeners' ears and they saw Oralano, the Indian, depart.

"She has dismissed the red in order not to let him know whither she intends taking the man on the horse," said Old Joe. "I believe we have found one of the two Mazeppas. Juanita and her charge must not get away."

The woman did not move until she had watched her guide out of sight. Joe and Red Hawk saw her look into the face of the silent rider, and then for the first time discovered that a handkerchief covered his mouth.

As if she thought she was not watched at all now, Juanita relaxed some of her former caution and led the trailers some distance before she stopped again.

"She's dropped into a hole in the ground!" said Old Joe, drawing back with astonishment depicted on his leathery countenance.

Red Hawk stood dumfounded, but made no reply.

"She was right thar a moment ago, but whar is she now?"

The mystery was soon solved to a certain extent, for the trailers saw an opening like the mouth of a cavern, though at first none was visible. This opening was large enough for a horse and his rider, and Joe discovered that a quantity of vines hid it from view and that Juanita must have held them aside while the steed went in.

"Shall we follow?" he asked with a smile, turning upon the eager red-skin.

"Red Hawk will follow anything."

In a moment the twain stood within the cavern which was dark. They could hear the echoes of hoofs beyond the opening and were about to move forward when something passed their heads.

"Jehosaphat! a bat as big as a bar!" cried Old Joe.

In a jiffy a hand fell across his mouth for he had unwittingly spoken aloud.

"I couldn't help that. The Bundys never took to bats, nobow," he said when the hand was withdrawn.

Hoping that the old scout's exclamation had not alarmed the Hermit Queen, our friends moved on again and came to a halt against a wall of solid stone, beyond which they could not go.

"Follow the wall," whispered Joe.

They did this for some time, when all at once a light flashed in their faces, and they stood in the presence of the woman they had been tracking.

In an instant Joe and Red Hawk fell back, their hands moving instinctively to their revolvers; but they saw that a hand as firm as theirs already held a weapon as deadly in their faces, and their six shooters were not drawn.

"I know you. You have trailed the Hermit Queen of the Hills," said a voice. "Don't you know that you have doomed yourselves to a living death?"

"We have a right to hunt this country," answered Joe Bundy, with his old-time nerve. "We don't intend to take from you anything that belongs to you. We are looking for the survivor of the last swoop of the infamous Prince Pedro."

A smile appeared to cross the face in the light of the torch which illumined the scene.

"Do you expect to find that survivor here?" demanded Juanita.

"We think he isn't far off."

"Do you think he is in my hands?"

"We have a right to believe that he is."

"Then, you have been watching me?"

"By Jehosaphat! we couldn't help it," cried Old Joe. "We came across you out yonder, and saw the gagged man on the horse and—"

"Follow me!" interrupted the woman, turning suddenly and leading the way. "Maybe he will talk coherently for you."

Joe and Red Hawk followed the torch, and presently saw its bearer halt over a man who lay on the ground.

"Here he is, and as mad as a March hare," she said, looking up into the faces at her side.

"Do you know him?"

Joe Bundy bent over the young man, over whose face still lay the handkerchief.

"He must be Larry Blair, the youth who accompanied Nevins and the girl Nelly—"

A wild cry broke the sentence, and he was jerked up by the hand of Juanita, whose face was deathly white, and in whose bulging eyes was a stare of horror.

"Nevins and Nelly, did you say!" she almost shrieked. "Where are they?"

"Nevins is dead and the girl is at the ranch."

There was no reply, only Juanita fell back to the wall, and dropping the revolver, drew a dagger, which she suddenly lifted above her breast.

The old scout divined her intention, and sprang forward; but the knife came down like a descending arrow.

CHAPTER VI.

PRINCE PEDRO'S TERRIBLE TRUMP.

ORIOLE BILL, the singer of Prince Pedro's camp, had it right when he intimated that Tiger Foot, the person to whom the bandit of the border had shown the wealth of the underground treasure-house, was not an Indian at all, but Mustang Merle the boy rancher.

If Prince Pedro had followed Tiger Foot from camp he would have seen him bend his course toward the ranch at the door of which he reined in his steed and entered the house.

Five minutes later he had resumed his regular garb and had called into his presence a handsome man of six feet to whom he was talking rapidly.

"I have seen the lair of the plains wolf," said Mustang Merle. "I bring this back as a proof," and he tossed upon the table the gold-mounted whip Prince Pedro had given him.

"That is a senorita's plaything," said Yellow Van, the man before him.

"Yes. It belonged across the border. You know I could have gotten the whip nowhere else but in Prince Pedro's camp?"

"Of course, Master Merle."

"To-morrow night we will teach these rascals a lesson. By that time Joe and Red Hawk will have returned."

"The boys are ready for the fight. They are aching to get at this devil of the border and each one will give a good account of himself."

The boy rancher retired. This time there were no traitors enjoying his hospitality. On several occasions he had been harassed by traitors and some of his plans had been given away, but now he could trust every man under his roofs, and with this thought to cheer him he fell asleep.

The morning came and by and by there were seen riding toward the ranch two horsemen who supported a form between them.

In an instant Mustang Merle heard a cry and the next moment there rushed across the open and toward the men a young girl with streaming hair.

It was Nelly Nevins.

"You have found him?" she cried, with clasped hands, as she halted before the horsemen who proved to be Joe Bundy and Red Hawk. "You have found Larry, but where is Uncle Abner?"

"The truth is, we couldn't just fetch him," said Joe, with a glance at his companion.

"He is dead."

Nelly followed the pair to the house into which Larry Blair was led and placed in a chair.

Mustang Merle stood and watched the play of light and shade on the youthful face over which Nelly bent with womanly tenderness, while Joe narrated their adventures in search of the two Mazeppas.

"We had to leave the woman in the cave," he said, in tones which the girl, absorbed with her attentions to the late captive, did not hear.

"The wound she inflicted was not very deep, and when we tried to doctor her she broke from our grasp and ran back into that hole in the ground which is a perfect maze. In fact, we lost her, and eager to get this boy to Mesquite, we came away. But we know the road back, and will go and find her some other time."

"She must be found," said Mustang Merle.

"But first we will pay our respects to Prince Pedro and his band of border cut-throats. I have been to their camp—"

"You, boy?" cried Old Joe.

"Why not?"

Merle crossed the room and came back with the whip in his hand.

"This proves it," said Joe, with a glance at the whip. "In Heaven's name, what sort of a game did you play ag'in' the old hawk of the plains?"

"I was Tiger Foot, the Comanche."

"Ho, ho! Do you hear that, Red Hawk?"

The Apache nodded.

Slowly, under the gentle care of Nelly, Larry Blair seemed to come out of that terrible mad

trance into which he had been thrown by the indescribable tortures of the Waterless Plain, and when his eyes had back their old natural look, and he could reply to their questionings, a sweet smile overspread the face of the young creature.

All that day the men of Mesquite prepared for the swoop on the human vultures of the Southwest.

Fire-arms were looked to with the greatest of care; for all realized the desperate nature of the undertaking at hand, and that Prince Pedro would fight to the death.

Larry came out of the house toward sundown, with a glitter in his eyes, and laid his hand on Mustang Merle's arm.

"I go with you," said he.

In an instant the young rancher had turned, and was looking into the white face of the bandit's victim.

"Don't say no, for I will not listen to it," he went on. "You don't know the oath I took at the grave I left on the Waterless Plain. It was an oath of vengeance intensified by the most terrible sufferings. Nelly has given her permission, and she knows that I will not disgrace her. Mustang Merle, I go with you to-night."

"You shall go," was the answer, and the hand of Larry Blair took the boy's with a grasp of thankfulness ere he turned back.

By sundown everything was ready, and leaving behind a guard, the avengers of many a heartless act rode from Mesquite, resolved to pay Prince Pedro back for more than one desperate swoop and massacre.

The gallop across the country was devoid of incident, and in time the band swam the Tagus and pulled up on its furthest bank.

Beyond the river rose the hill where lay the camp of the bandits, and Mustang Merle, who was his own guide, led his men forward.

What if the bandits were on the lookout? What if they had discovered Tiger Foot's real identity?

Merle could not expect to catch a weasel asleep.

At last it was past midnight and the avengers rode close to the hill without a challenge.

"The camp's actually asleep," passed from lip to lip.

"Don't fool yerself," said Old Joe to one of these whisperers. "I don't expect to catch Prince Pedro napping. The chances are that we will find him up to some devilment. If he is, that will be something for all of us to remember."

The foot of the hill was gained. All was still.

"The camp is deserted," said Merle. "The birds have flown, but we do not go back without a brush to the death with them."

The men dismounted and ran everywhere through the deserted camp: Everything denoted hasty flight.

Mustang Merle led a party to the mouth of the cavern in the hill, but stopped there.

He had not forgotten what Prince Pedro had told him about the secret wires, and that at a certain moment he could blow the hill and all its contents sky high.

"We can cut the wires the moment we find them," said Joe to his young master. "If the rascals have vamoosed the camp they can't blow us up—that's pretty certain."

A dozen men, led by Merle, plunged into the opening. A torch was lighted and threw its glare over the underground scene.

Mustang Merle led his men from room to room hoping to find the treasures he had seen, and at the same time was looking for the wires which ran along the wall.

"Hyer they ar', the wires I mean!" cried Joe, halting suddenly and pointing at the objects of his discovery.

"Cut them at once!" rung out the voice of the boy rancher.

Old Joe snatched the tomahawk that rested in Red Hawk's belt and lifted it above his head.

The next instant the hatchet came down and there was a terrible explosion which seemed to rend the hill.

The whole interior of the chamber was an immense blaze of light.

Men were thrown in every direction before it abated and the hill felt the throes of the crash as if it had been rent by an earthquake.

The mine had been exploded as if by the stroke of the tomahawk and Joe had wrecked everything!

Thrown against a rock, Mustang Merle recovered consciousness only after a long spell. He was surrounded by Cimmerian darkness and the air was laden with the fumes of the explosives which almost suffocated him as he gasped for breath.

"In Heaven's name, am I the only survivor of

Prince Pedro's last piece of devilment?" he said to himself as he groped his way over a mass of broken rock.

There was no reply.

He found a match in one of his pockets and drew it along the wall.

As the little flame shot into existence he fell back with a groan from the sight that encountered his gaze.

Men were lying in every direction; some held down by huge rocks, and others in the open; but all, so far as he could see, dead!

The young owner of Mesquite roused himself and crept forward.

Fortunately he had escaped without much injury and could stand without support.

He made a trumpet of his hands and shouted aloud.

The only sound that came back was the echo of his own voice, and in despair he flung down the match and stood once more in the dark cavern.

When he went forward again it was in search of the opening by which he had led his gallant followers to their doom. The rough wall was his only guide, and at last he came upon a pile of rocks which told him that the opening had been closed by the explosion and that he was buried alive!

The situation was one of utmost horror.

Mustang Merle recoiled from the doom that threatened him, and for a time stood speechless.

"What, die here at the hands of Prince Pedro?" he exclaimed. "I will not! I will live to hunt down that infernal rascal! I am still on the war trail, and he shall yet feel the avenging hand of Merle of Mesquite!"

The boy's last words were followed by a Satanic laugh. He ran forward a few steps and listened.

"I will laugh last!" he cried.

CHAPTER VII.

NELLY NEVINS HOLDS THE FORT.

THE destruction of the interior of the bandits' hill seemed complete.

The men who did not enter the place with Merle were thrown back by the force of the explosion, and before they could recover they found themselves assailed by Prince Pedro and his minions.

From every corner of the night the War Saddles came down upon them with shout and yell, at the same time discharging their weapons at the living targets that dodged hither and thither.

The Mesquiteros believed that the explosion of the mine had terminated the existence of every one on the inside, and had no heart to defend themselves against the brigands, but rather sought safety in flight, so that in a short time the remnant which escaped from the border scourges were riding back to Mesquite with a story of horror for the ears of those left behind.

"Come!" said Pedro. "This is a chance we have never had before. The boy rancher and his best friends are lost forever. The young rat himself is cooped up in the underground trap, and will never see sunlight again. There is rich spoil at Mesquite, which is practically defenseless. This is our time! Now or never! We must get ahead of the few who have escaped."

The War Saddles rode from the scene of their last success, and by a route known only to them, soon distanced the fugitives and were on the trail leading to the ranch.

The sun was mounting toward the zenith when the War Saddles were seen coming over the hills near the ranch.

"Merle is coming back already!" cried some one and a little group of ranchmen assembled among the stables and watched the approaching party.

All at once they discovered their mistake. It was not the boy rancher returning from punishing the border bandit king, but Prince Pedro himself.

"To arms! to arms!" rung out the cry on every side and while some darted to the house to acquaint its occupants of the cyclone that threatened, others ran to the horses and hastily saddled the best.

Prince Pedro and his men did not check their speed, but came on with yells which seemed to strike terror to the hearts of those who heard them.

The War Saddles were strong enough to overcome all opposition and this they did in a jiffy, for they replied to the volley fired in their faces by Merle's men and almost annihilated the defenders.

The rest did not fight longer, but some threw themselves upon the steeds and galloped away.

"Everything goes!" laughed Prince Pedro in high glee. "This is the crowning triumph in my career. I fancy it is getting even with Mustang Merle for the death of my old friends, Captain Red Jacket and Dolores Dick. Now, remember the ranch is not to be burnt. You men may take what you like, but the torch is not to be applied."

With this the whole band drew up in front of the house and Prince Pedro sprang from the saddle and landed on the porch.

He clanked across the boards and laid his hand on the latch.

Before he could open the door it was drawn inward and the captain of the War Saddles recoiled with a cry for a vision of loveliness stood before him.

Nelly Nevins had opened the portal and confronted him revolver in hand, a look of defiance in her dark eyes.

"What, are you the fair keeper of the fort?" laughed the bandit when he recovered his breath.

"I am the only one left to confront you," was the reply. "The ranch has not yet been surrendered!"

The men in the saddles laughed at their leader's discomfiture, but Prince Pedro did not quail again.

"But you don't intend to fight us all?" he cried. "My dear girl, we outnumber you twenty to one and—"

"If the odds were twice as great I would not surrender Mesquite to a band of border cut-throats!"

The door was shut in Prince Pedro's face and he turned to his followers with a laugh of derision.

"I like that sort of snap, boys," he exclaimed. "I don't think we would have whipped them if they had all been like this fighting seraph."

"She may wing you from the window, captain!" called out one of the men. "Look out."

Prince Pedro said nothing, but crossed the porch again and rapped on the door.

"We have had fun enough, miss," he said. "I am Prince Pedro, but not the cut-throat you have called me. Open in the name of border law!"

There came forth no answer to the demand of the robber prince, and biting his lip, Prince Pedro kicked on the door and left a mark on its panel.

The next moment the half-muffled report of a fire-arm was heard and the bullet that crashed through the door grazed the bandit's head and sent him back with a curse.

This seemed to take all the mercy from Prince Pedro's nature, and he sprang like a lion at the door and throwing himself against it tore it from its fastenings and sent it inward.

"Hurrah for the captain!" shouted a dozen voices as the leader of the War Saddles pitched into the house only to be confronted by a revolver which was clutched in the determined hand of Nelly Nevins.

"I come of fighting blood and will not hesitate to send a bullet through the head of the murderer of my kin!" she said. "Go back, Captain Pedro. Cross the porch and mount your steed, or I will end here the life that has lasted too long already."

There was "shoot" in the eyes that blazed behind the leveled weapon; the arm was as steady as an arm of iron, and the beauty of the one defender of Mesquite made Prince Pedro more than ever anxious to take her captive.

She advanced upon him with her last words and the revolver came nearer and looked deadlier than before.

"Quit the house which you have polluted with your presence," said Nelly. "As I live, I will kill you, Prince Pedro, for I will never fall alive into your hands."

The courage of the captain of the War Saddles seemed to ooze out at his finger ends.

The contrast between him and the slender girl was striking, but Nelly held her ground.

"I shall count three," she said, glancing along the polished barrel of the revolver into the bronzed but handsome face of the bandit leader.

"Stand your ground, captain! We are with you. Don't let the beauty of the ranch keep you out of a prize."

Prince Pedro heard these words behind him and for a moment they infused new courage into his blood.

"One!" said the fair girl suddenly.

Captain Pedro did not move.

"You can't hope to defeat us all," he said.

"Two—" was the only answer he received.

"Mustang Merle and your young friend have been blown sky high."

Nelly seemed to receive a sudden shock, but the revolver did not drop a mite.

By this time some of the bandits who had entered the house from the rear were about to enter the room occupied by the courageous girl. Nelly's quick ear caught the noises they made and realized what had happened.

She fell back, crossing the apartment until she had reached the door which they were about to force. An iron rod hung above it in a manner which enabled it to drop by the touching of a button in the wall, and all at once, throwing up one hand, she pressed the button and the rod fell.

The barricade was sufficient to keep the bandits out in that direction, and having done this, Nelly suddenly came toward Prince Pedro, thrusting a six-shooter into his face and saying in tones that told him that he had encountered the most desperate little beauty of his whole career:

"Back! Cross the porch, or by the heavens above us! you have not a second to live!"

The robber recoiled; this time he was followed up by Nelly and the moment the heavy boots had touched the porch, the broken door was seized by the girl, righted in a moment, and a bar of iron fell into its place!

If, in the excitement which had followed the first assault, she had not forgotten the bar, Prince Pedro might not have reached the point from which he had just been forced to retreat.

The leader of the border outlaws turned to his smiling men with the rage of a baffled tiger.

To have been beaten by a man was enough, but a girl had driven him from the house!

For a moment he stood on the porch, biting his lips beneath his mustache and grinding particles of desert sand to powder beneath his heel.

"I will show the beauty that she can't hold the fort against me!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Bring up yon pole and four or six of you dismount and take it."

There was an instant springing from saddles and Prince Pedro saw his men seize the pole which lay on the ground a few steps from the house.

He stood aside and directed the proceedings.

"You want to strike the door a little below the middle. There is a bar of iron across it at that point," he said to his myrmidons, four of whom, stalwart fellows, had taken up the pole.

It was a moment of keen suspense. Human life trembled in the balance. The beautiful defender behind the menaced door held in her hands more lives than one.

Prince Pedro was about to give the command to attack when some one uttered a cry.

"Look! Yonder come the survivors of the hill fight!"

The bandit looked toward the west. Sure enough a number of men were riding down upon the ranch.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BURIED ALIVE.

PRINCE PEDRO looked at the new riders a moment, and then at the men who held the battering-ram.

He seemed to be mentally calculating whether he could force the door first, and then beat off the avengers, riding with such fearless spirit toward the ranch.

"There are but seven of them, captain, and when they get sight of our numbers they'll turn tail and let us alone."

But Prince Pedro thought differently, for he had eyed the Mesquites long enough to know that from the manner of their riding they intended to throw themselves upon him, however small their numbers were.

"The ranchers first!" he said to his men, and those who had hold of the ram let it fall and sprung to their Winchesters.

At that same moment the seven riders threw themselves along the sides of their steeds, after the manner of Comanches, and came on, much to the War Saddles' astonishment.

"Down with the scourges of the border!" arose the war-cry of the fearless seven, and puffs of smoke issuing from alongside the charging steeds told that their riders knew how to handle their firearms under difficulties.

Men near Prince Pedro tumbled right and left, and a bullet carried away a lock from the ruffian's head.

The maddened War Saddles returned the volley, and several horses were seen to pitch forward, but not a rider was unsaddled.

"Give it to them again!" shouted Prince Pedro, and his men fired another volley, which stretched one man on the ground, in the agonies of death, but did not check the speed of the others.

Seeing that his men were not making much

headway against their new assailants, the bandit was compelled to draw off behind the house, from whence he poured another volley into the ranks of the brave ranchers, which, like its predecessors, did not do much damage.

"No mercy to the villains of the plains!" cried the men of Mesquite. "Vengeance for the massacre of Hollow Hill!"

On some occasions the War Saddles had performed prodigies of valor, but it was generally when the odds were largely in their favor, or when they could swoop down upon a sleeping camp at the dead hour of night; but they were not used to meeting a foe in open fight, as they now found themselves compelled to do.

The men of the ranch had ceased to ride upon the house, but had halted in the protecting shadow of some trees, and from that point were firing at every head that showed itself.

At last, swearing future vengeance, Prince Pedro gave the command to draw off, and in a little while the late fugitives of the hill battle saw the backs of the foe.

Prince Pedro had left behind seven of his men, while but one of the Spartan band had been killed; and when they rode away a cheer arose from the throats of the victors, and a young girl who had emerged from the house waved her hand after the vanquished bandits.

"Tell me! Did the captain of the bandits lie?" cried Nelly, springing forward and halting at the side of the leader of the band of rescuers. "He said that he had blown Mustang Merle and Larry sky high—"

She stopped suddenly, for she saw the cloud of bad news that had gathered on the face of the man she addressed.

"I'm afraid he told a good deal of truth, miss," was the interruption.

"Tell me. I am strong enough to hear it all."

In a few words the man told Nelly all he knew about the explosion and said, in conclusion, that, as they were compelled to seek safety in flight with the intention of rendering Mesquite all the assistance they could, he was afraid not one of all those who had entered the hill had escaped.

"Why didn't I send a bullet through the brain of the chief of ruffians?" cried Nelly. "I had him at my mercy and once or twice felt my finger pressing the trigger. But my time will come yet. I will show this man that a girl can avenge the dead!" and she turned and looked after the flying bandits with no color at her lips.

It was evident, even to the girl who had held the fort with such tenacity, that the rescuers had arrived in the nick of time, for while she thought she would have been able to have dropped one or two of the wielders of the pole, the door would have been forced in time and she would have fallen into Prince Pedro's power.

It had been a terrible day for Mesquite, and long before sundown those who had fallen in its defense had been buried, and the survivors made preparations for resisting a night attack, as they were almost certain that the War Saddles would return and try again.

While this is going on at the ranch, let us go back to the bloody hill and see how fares the boy rancher whom we left in the gloom of the living tomb.

Mustang Merle had at last made a pleasing discovery even under the terrible circumstances in which he found himself placed.

This was nothing less than that he was not the only living soul in the hill.

A hand had suddenly touched him in the dark, and he had heard a voice which filled him with a thrill of joy.

"The Bundy family ar' on top yet! I'm a little disfigured but still in the ring."

"Old Joe! Thank Heaven!" cried Merle, squeezing the hard hand of the lank scout. "We are the only ones who escaped instant death."

"Don't know about that. The firm ground opened at my feet an' I fell into a pit that seemed bottomless, for I dropped a long distance, and it took me a year—so it seemed—ter git back."

Merle and Old Joe exchanged a good many words, and at last the boy rancher proposed that they investigate the fate of their companions.

Provided with a light, they crept over the broken rocks and came upon several dead men.

"I see nothing of Red Hawk," said Merle. "This fills me with hope, for I would not lose the services of that Indian for the world."

"It takes more than an explosion big as that one was to kill the Apache," said Joe. "He's as tough as the Bundys, an' they're very tough. See here!" and Joe knelt and held his light over the imprint of a moccasin in the fine dust of the underground cavern.

Both were looking at the footprint when a

sound behind caused them to turn, and they saw standing near the wall the figure of Red Hawk.

Mustang Merle almost dropped his torch, overjoyed at the unexpected sight, and Red Hawk came forward.

"Three living prisoners of a tomb!" said Joe, with a grin.

The Indian's countenance did not relax.

"Where tomahawk?" demanded Red Hawk.

"Great Jehosaphat! it war blown out o' my hand. The moment I struck the wire the whole thing went off, an' I went I don't know whar. You don't intend ter hold me responsible for that tomahawk, I hope?"

Despite the gravity of the situation, Merle could not repress a smile.

"The hole is a deep one," said Red Hawk.

"What, war you thrown into it, too?"

Red Hawk fell down along a wall, bumping here and there on the pointed rocks, but he climbed up, and here he is, ready to pay Prince Pedro back for what he did.

"Put 'er thar!" cried Old Joe, holding out his bronzed hand. "If ever I war with any one, I am with you on that."

"Red Hawk heard the rush of the river that is far under ground."

"I thought I heard something like water myself. Don't you know that these hills and plains have rivers far beneath them?"

The Indian nodded.

An hour's search told the trio that they were securely cooped up in the ground; that the explosion had changed the whole interior of the cavern, and had fastened up the main entrance as surely as though a mason had walled them in.

"But we get air from somewhere," said Merle. "It comes up, up!" replied the red-skin.

"Then, down we go to see whar it comes from!"

Not long afterward the three friends stood on what seemed the edge of a bottomless pit which Joe declared was the one opened by the explosion. The lights of the torches failed to show them the depths of the place and they could only look down and speculate about it. Merle threw a fragment of rock into the darkness that prevailed below the circle of light and all listened for the landing of the stone.

They could not hear it strike the bottom of the hole.

All at once Red Hawk snatched the torch from Merle's hands and ran back. He was gone some time, when he returned, dragging at his heels a quantity of rope which he had found somewhere—odd ends of lasso, bridles and the like.

"Red Hawk go down and see how deep the well is and where it leads to," was all the Indian said, as he fell to splicing the cords and trying their strength.

When he finished his job he lowered the long rope over the edge of the pit and gave the other end to his companions.

Merle and Joe saw him crawl over the fringe of the abyss and lower himself with the courage of a sailor.

Down he went as they could tell by the motions of the rope, which was nearly two hundred feet in length.

All at once the swaying of the cord stopped, and the two at the uppermost end awaited the result with conflicting emotions.

The torch had been stuck into a crack in the wall near by and threw its light upon the surrounding scene.

"He's coming up," said Joe Bundy. "That pull means that we should lift him to the surface. I don't expect he found anything worth smiling over, though. Pull away, Merle. We can't afford ter let that cunning red-skin remain whar he is."

Both Merle and Joe pulled away with all their might and felt that they were bringing Red Hawk out of the pit.

The hands of the Indian were first seen and then he sprung into the light.

"Red Hawk has found air and a trail!" he cried.

"Hooray!" cried Old Joe. "When I make my will, chief, I'll give you the hull Bundy estate providin' thar's one ter give away when that event takes place."

CHAPTER IX.

A DIFFERENT SORT OF SWOOP.

It will be remembered that Joe Bundy, on his return to Mesquite with Larry Blair, whom he found in the cavern inhabited by Juanita, the Hermit Queen, told how the woman, after stabbing herself with the dagger, had plunged into the darkness of the underground retreat and vanished.

If Joe and Red Hawk had followed her down a certain path not visible to the eye amid the gloom, they would have seen her reach a spot where she fell exhausted on the stones.

The strange creature, whose past was not known to any one among the hills, lay in a swoon for some time, and when she recovered, she groped her way on until she emerged from the cave and stood beneath a jutting rock.

"Fool that I was, not to have struck the heart I aimed at!" she exclaimed. "What was that the Yankee said about the fate of Nevins and the nearness of the girl? At Mesquite Ranch? How I would like to see her—but I dare not! What brought them into this region? Fate? Merciful heavens! am I to perish here without once more seeing the face so dear when I was a happier woman?"

She stanchd the flow of blood from the self-inflicted wound, which was not dangerous, and turned away.

Not long afterward she might have been seen riding from the scene of her last halt, and many hours later she appeared on the hill overlooking the boy rancher's home.

Juanita was a beautiful creature, but the life she had led, and her wild existence, had made her on more than one occasion the terror of the camps of the border, for she would shoot "at the drop of the hat" as the saying went, and more than one desperado had looked into the muzzle of her revolver and trembled.

"She is yonder," said Juanita, speaking to herself, while she surveyed the fair fields of Mesquite, and watched the herders drive home the herds. "They have had trouble there, for the men go doubly armed."

Night was coming down over the landscape, and by and by the sun set, and Juanita saw the shadows grow longer than the tall trees in front of the house.

"I would be willing to die if I could see her once more," she went on. "That is why I came hither, and I will not go back without a long look at her. I wonder if she has any recollections of her mother? Why should she have any?"

Dismounting, Juanita stole toward the house, creeping from shadow to shadow like a wily serpent.

She neared the house, and was within a few yards of the porch, and was crouching in the tall grass there, when the door opened and a young girl came out.

The sudden appearance of Nelly seemed to drive a dagger to Juanita's heart.

She fell back and uttered a sharp groan.

"Heavens! what a picture for eyes like mine!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't I find my heart with the needle-pointed steel?"

Nelly stood for a few moments on the porch, when she went back into the house and the woman in the grass breathed freer.

"Why not take her back with me?" she said. "Why not let her know that she is safer with me than here? It is no trick at all. I know how to get possession of her and once in my hands, all the men of the ranch could not tear her from me."

Nelly was alone in the room which she had defended against the War Saddles when she heard a step on the porch and then a rap sounded in her ears.

"One of the guards with some news," she murmured, rising and crossing the room.

"Who is there?" she asked.

"A friend."

"That was a woman's voice," exclaimed Nelly, laying hands on the fastenings.

The door was opened and the beauty of the ranch recoiled from the figure that stood before her.

"Don't let me frighten you," said Juanita, stepping into the house and at the same time seizing Nelly's wrist. "I am not Prince Pedro. I hate that villain as few people can hate. I have come to talk to you. We are alone?"

"Quite alone," said Nelly.

For a little while Juanita stood and looked at the young niece of Abner Nevins. A strange color came and went on her face and her bosom rose and fell with an emotion she could not suppress.

"Where's your father?" she suddenly asked.

"He is dead."

"Did Prince Pedro send him over the arid wastes of the Southwest?"

"That was Uncle Abner."

"Ah! Your Uncle Abner and the young man?"

"And Larry."

"But your father? When did he die?"

"Five years ago."

There was a moment of dead silence during

which Nelly, looking into the eager face before her, thought she heard the beating of her own heart.

"What became of your mother?" she asked, with a supreme effort.

Nelly started.

"I wish you could tell me that," she cried. "I wish you could tell me what became of her. That is the mystery of my life. She went away when I was small and from that day to this I have never heard of her. Uncle Abner came to this country to look for a man who was said to possess a secret which he wanted solved, a secret upon which depends so much."

If the reader could have seen those two persons standing face to face beneath the roof of Mesquite he would have noticed the resemblance that existed between them.

"If Prince Pedro sent him across the Waterless Plain the secret is not likely to see a speedy solution, eh, my child?"

"I fear not."

"How came you here?"

"I wandered off from the camp in my sleep and was found by a white man and an Indian, and thus escaped the swoop which Prince Pedro and his gang of villains made upon the wagons."

"And the youth you call Larry?"

"He was brought back by Joe and Red Hawk, and is now with Merle, wherever he is."

All at once the hand of Juanita again fell about the young girl's wrist and closed there like the jaws of a vise.

Nelly drew back the length of the arm, but the grip was not loosened.

"I am going to take you with me," said Juanita, with a smile.

"You?"

"Why not?"

"But I am satisfied where I am."

"Perhaps, but I am not," was the reply.

Nelly saw in the depths of the eyes that regarded her a look that seemed to send her blood in chilling currents to her heart.

"Come! If you raise a cry I will choke you till life goes out," said the Hermit Queen. "I have come for you, and if you submit you will find me merciful; but if you don't I will be as merciless as Prince Pedro."

The door was opened and Nelly was dragged across the porch.

No one seemed to be at hand to help her, as if Juanita had silenced all the guards, and down between the lines of trees she was taken to the steed that waited for his mistress among the shadows.

Still holding Nelly's arm, Juanita vaulted into the saddle and drew her captive up to her.

"You haven't seen my home yet," she said with a light laugh. "I am going to show you how a princess of the hills lives. Don't give me any trouble, dear."

The horse responded to his mistress's word, and went off like an arrow.

Half dead from fear, though her senses did not desert her, the fair defender of Mesquite found herself being carried over the ground until a line of hills was reached.

"We are nearing home," said Juanita, looking down into the eyes of her prisoner.

"You are the creature called Juanita. I have heard Joe describe you."

"I am Juanita," was the reply. "I am the creature who hates the bandit raiders of the border, and who lives to pay their leader back for an old crime of the past."

Half an hour later the horse entered an opening in a side of a hill, and Nelly knew that she was in the strange woman's home.

When Juanita struck a light, she came and stood before Nelly, showing her fine figure to advantage.

"When Prince Pedro comes back to wreak his vengeance on Mesquite, he won't find you there as a part of the booty," she said. "Girl, if you had killed the captain of the War Saddles, I don't believe I should have carried you to my home."

Nelly made no reply.

"Would you get away from me if you could?"

"I would. I tell you that to your teeth. You have no right to keep me anywhere."

Juanita went to the entrance to the cavern, and presently came back. She made a line across the chamber, and Nelly looked at it, wondering what it meant.

"That is the dead line," she went on, looking up into the young girl's face. "You must not cross it without permission, for, much as I love you, if you do you will die."

"What, you love me?" cried Nelly Nevins.

"With all my guilty soul!" was the response, and with a singular cry Juanita turned away,

and Nelly saw her trembling in the light of the torch.

"Merciful heavens, I have fallen into the hands of an insane creature! Heaven protect me from her fury!"

Juanita turned suddenly upon her captive, and then after one look, bounded away.

Nelly did not know what to think.

CHAPTER X.

PRINCE PEDRO AT PLAY.

RED HAWK did not exaggerate when he informed Mustang Merle and Old Joe that he had found air and a trail below the edge of the pit in the hills.

"We won't quit the mine until we have settled the fate of Larry Blair," said the young rancher.

Once more they scoured the dark places of the cave and at last discovered the young man lying under a lot of stones which had fallen in such a manner as to hem him in without hurting him to any extent.

It was a most miraculous escape and all parties were much rejoiced.

Preparations for quitting the cavern were at once made, and in a short time all had descended to the bottom of the pit and were treading the underground path to the open air which Red Hawk had providentially discovered.

The trip back to Mesquite was full of breathings of future vengeance, and the moment Larry caught sight of the houses he ran forward and halted the first man he met with an eager inquiry for Nelly.

"We've lost the girl who held the fort ag'in' Prince Pedro," were the words that stunned him.

"Lost Nelly?"

"Yes. She's given us the slip, or else the bandit came back and played a little game of his own."

This was terrible news for Larry Blair and he turned away declaring that he would hunt Prince Pedro down and take vengeance for his last work.

Meantime the robber prince of the border was in a new camp which had no mine that he could explode by touching a button, and he and his men were recovering from their last battle with the white ranchers of Mesquite.

Prince Pedro was still resolved to get even with Merle's men and to secure the beautiful prize which had slipped through his fingers by the most gallant defense of a house ever made by a fair girl.

He stood apart from his men and was watching some vultures soaring in the blue of the summer sky.

Presently he hurriedly withdrew and went down a narrow path until he came to a large rock set against a tree beside the trail.

"I haven't been here for months, but I guess there's no letter for me," he said, thrusting his hand behind the stone.

In a moment he had taken out a piece of paper which was somewhat soiled and looked at it with surprise.

"I wonder how long this has been here?" he murmured. "Juan said he would tell me if he found anything worth plucking and this no doubt is his letter."

Prince Pedro found the words rather difficult to read, for the weather had blurred them, but he mastered them at last.

"MY DEAR CAPITAN:—"

"The Red Ranch has been restocked, and is now the richest one in the land. It is richer than Mesquite, and if you want good spoil you must attack it as soon as possible. The old man has ordered his fine stock to be sold, but the sale won't take place for some time. Make hay while the sun shines, and you will have a good crop. Don't forget what you promised me for this report."

"JUAN."

Prince Pedro smiled to himself when he read this missive, which he folded and stored away under his jacket.

"We might ride over to the Red Ranch and see what is there," he said. "It would make the boys feel better after what has happened to our fortunes."

He went back to the camp and ordered the horses saddled.

The bandits sprung to this task with alacrity, for they knew that a raid was at hand, and soon all were galloping over the country, and before nightfall came in sight of a ranch belonging to a rich man known as Major Pintado.

The Red Ranch, as it was called, was large and well-stocked. It had never been raided, probably because it was understood that its owner paid tribute to the raiders of the border, which was not the case, for Major Pintado was not that sort of person.

The practiced eye of Prince Pedro saw that he had chosen for the attack the very hour when the ranch was least likely to be prepared for the raid.

He had hoped by this little side diversion to raise the hopes of his men, and to keep them in proper humor to return to Mesquite at another time.

With his men on all sides of him, Prince Pedro gave the signal for the swoop, and the bandits dashed down upon the ranch.

The surprise was complete.

The few *attaches* of the place were secured without so much as a single shot, and as the major himself was not at home, the looting began at once.

Some of the bandits filled their capacious pockets with silver coin, which was everywhere; and others raided the cellars and filled up on the major's wines.

The diversion was a success, and Prince Pedro was about to quit the scene of the raid when he suddenly thought of something.

He stalked into the major's library and sat down at the table there.

Taking up a pen, he wrote the following on a sheet of paper:

"MY DEAR MAJOR PINTADO:—

"I am sorry you were not at home to receive me, but the next time I come you will do me the honor to welcome me and my men. I have left you a few colts and some small change, with a few bottles of wine. Please don't give me any trouble over this little visit. I am not always the soft-footed tiger, for when I want to I can show my claws.

"PRINCE PEDRO."

He laughed aloud when he signed his name to this document, and laid it on the table for Major Pintado's perusal.

The bandits mounted their steeds and rode away.

There was little left behind worth taking besides the ranch buildings, and these, of course, could not be carried off by the raiders.

Prince Pedro laughed whenever he thought of the letter he had left in the library for the major. How he would curse and tear his hair when he found his horses gone and his money in the purses of the War Saddles of the Southwest!

All at once on the summit of a rise Prince Pedro and his men drew rein and looked ahead.

They could see the country far and wide from that spot and their eyes had caught sight of a woman riding alone over the landscape not half a mile off.

"It looks to me like Juanita," said Prince Pedro to his nearest man.

"You are right; it is the Hermit Queen of the Hills."

He watched the rider a minute longer and then ordering his band to proceed, turned aside and rode away.

"I've longed to meet her alone and now is my opportunity," he muttered. "I will see what she has to say for herself, for I haven't seen her since the night she confronted me at Tagus City and would have shot me dead if Oriole Bill hadn't stepped in."

Presently Prince Pedro, who disappeared entirely for some time, came into view again.

He drew rein and waited for the steed which he knew was approaching, bearing his rider on and into the snare he had spread.

But all at once something seemed to stop the woman called Juanita.

"What has checked her?" cried Prince Pedro, leaning forward in his saddle.

The next moment he turned white, for Juanita had caught sight of his head among the bushes and in an instant had covered it with a Winchester.

Of course the captain of the War Saddles ducked his head but he heard the ping of a bullet as it clipped a bough at his ear and his steed shied a little.

In another moment a second bullet had sung past him and he was cursing the woman who was sending the leaden pellets after him.

"She shoots almighty wicked without seeing her target," he exclaimed. "I fully expect the third ball to tumble me from the saddle. She hates me like Satan hates holy water, and she has reason to. Why don't she shoot again?"

The third bullet did not come until Prince Pedro with a revolver clutched in one hand bent forward again, for a second exposing his head.

There was another report and this time the horse of the bandit started forward so suddenly that Prince Pedro was almost thrown to the ground.

Black Lightning, the steed, sprung out of

cover and before his master could check him had carried him some distance away.

The ruffian looked over his shoulder and saw coming after him at full speed the woman who had treated him to several very narrow escapes.

"Words won't stop that creature!" he said through his teeth. "She wants blood or nothing."

On came Juanita, her eyes seeing nothing but the horse and his rider.

"I'll try it, anyhow," thought Prince Pedro, and rising in his stirrups he took off and waved his hat at the woman, a signal common in that country for the pursuer to stop.

But the signal was ineffectual, for Juanita came on, the rifle at her shoulder, and the horse carrying her swiftly toward her enemy.

All at once Prince Pedro dodged under his steed's belly, but that did not save him, for the Winchester spoke and he uttered a cry.

"Now for life, Black Lightning!" he cried, tearing at his horse's flanks with the red spurs, and the maddened animal seemed endowed with the fury of a fiend.

Away went Prince Pedro as he had never ridden before.

Juanita with a yell of delight started in pursuit.

It threatened to be a chase which must end in victory for the Hermit Queen for she seemed to ride the swifter horse, but all at once her animal stumbled and she was thrown over his head and lay stunned in the trail.

If Prince Pedro had known this—if he could have looked back and seen the woman of the hills lying like one dead among the rocks—he would have ridden back and terminated a desperate game.

But he knew it not, and his black steed bore him on until one of his own men caught the rein and stopped him.

Prince Pedro gave vent to an exclamation of joy.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SILVER BULLET.

"HARK! What is that? Somebody singing, I do declare. And what a voice he has. Listen!"

Clear and distinct the chorus of the wild refrain came over the starlit landscape and those whose ears had caught it sat like statues in their saddles:

"Hurrah, hurrah for Pedro's band,
The terror of the plain;
We are the masters of this land,
The ranchers hunt in vain!"

"They do, eh?" exclaimed one of the men who heard the song.

"He is down yonder in the gulch, and all we have to do is to lie in wait for him at the end of it. Shall we, Captain Merle?"

"Don't let him escape."

"Just as if Oriole Bill could get away from us! I'd like ter see the bird of the bandits escape from the trap we will set for him. Come, Red Hawk; you an' me will catch the singer an' find out what secrets he may have."

Joe Bundy and the young Apache left the band which Mustang Merle had again led from Mesquite after Prince Pedro and went down the trail.

They stationed themselves at the mouth of the little gulch from which the song seemed to have come and waited for Oriole Bill.

There was a half-smile on the face of the young Indian and a twinkle in the depths of his dark eyes.

"When I git tired of raiding here
I'll go back to my mamma,
I'll never l-ave her side ag'in
Way down in Alabama.
There I'll be a gentleman,
With a mighty h-ap of money;
And live as happy as I can
With all my golden honey."

"Gee whiz! he's fixin' things up ter suit himself!" ejaculated Old Joe at the conclusion of the verse. "Won't he have a grand time when he gits back ter Alabama? But the truth is, Red Hawk, he's more liable ter sing a song of trouble than to live on his golden store."

The Indian did not reply.

In a little while the noise of hoofs was heard in the gulch and presently the forms of a horse and his rider were seen approaching.

"Ready!" said Bundy in a whisper.

Red Hawk nodded, but continued to watch the man approaching.

"Halt, Oriole!" said the old Yankee.

In an instant the horse in the ravine was pulled up short and the man in the saddle lean-

ing forward laid one hand on the butt of a revolver.

"Who are you?" he demanded, but the six-shooters that were poked into his face seemed answer enough for he fell back and did not draw the weapon he had clutched.

"Can't yer give us another stanza?" queried Joe. "You sing like a seraph; that is, I think you do, but the fact is, I've never heard a real, genuine seraph sing."

The face of Oriole Bill was nearly white, and when he was taken into custody and led up the trail, he seemed to know what his capture meant.

"Hyer he is," said Joe, as he presented the prisoner to Mustang Merle. "This is the sweet singer of Texas, O iole William."

The boy mustanger bent forward and scanned the figure before him.

"I recognize him," he said.

"In heaven's name, how did you escape from the mine?" cried the captive.

"What, did you think the explosion had annihilated us?"

"I did not doubt it."

"Never mind how we got out, but here we are, and now, Oriole, we want a bit of information."

"About the captain?"

"Yes."

"I betray no one."

A frown darkened the face of the young avenger.

"Oh, you don't, eh?" he said. "You don't intend to betray the greatest rascal that ever sat a saddle?"

No answer.

"Here, Joe, Red Hawk; take this man out and see that he sings no more songs."

In an instant the hands of Joe Bundy and Red Hawk were stretched out to take hold of Oriole Bill.

The singer drew back and looked into the eyes of the pards.

"Make sure work of him," continued Merle. "We are on the war-path now and don't intend to mince matters."

"Mercy!" came from Bill's throat.

"You can't have it without you tell us what we want to know. The plundered ranches of the Southwest and the unfortunates who have been compelled to ride wild horses to their death cry aloud for vengeance, and I shall not turn back until I have settled with this villain called Prince Pedro."

"Come," said Joe, drawing Bill away. "If you don't want ter sing any more you will keep yer mouth shut, for, by hokey! you won't open it after to-night."

"Take him away!"

Oriole Bill seemed on the eve of relenting, but all at once his lips met and he flashed a look of defiance at his captors.

"Do your worst. I betray no one," he said.

It was evident that Mustang Merle was disappointed, that he expected to see the lips of the prisoner open and tell him the whereabouts of Prince Pedro, and he looked strangely at Bill when he was led away by Red Hawk and Joe.

"I'll tell him what he wants to know," suddenly said Bill.

Joe and the Indian exchanged swift glances.

"Take him back," said the former.

When Bill was brought back into Merle's presence he said:

"You sha'n't kill me while my life is worth something to myself. I am ready to talk."

"Where is Prince Pedro?"

"Across the border."

For a moment Merle did not know whether to believe the man or not.

"When did he cross?"

"Day before yesterday."

"But why are you here?"

"I was too sick to ride."

"Don't you think you rekindled almighty soon?" put in Old Joe.

There was no reply, more than a quick, mad look from the prisoner.

"When will your master come back?"

"I cannot say."

"Soon?"

"I tell you, I cannot say."

Mustang Merle waved his hand toward the gulch.

"Take him away!" he said to Joe Bundy.

"Just what I thought. You can't lie well enough ter kiver yer trail, Bill. You'll soon be a real angel, and kin sing through countless ages—"

"I haven't lied!" broke in Oriole Bill. "I have told you the truth. Prince Pedro is across the border."

"Then we will find him," was Merle's reply.

Hope was seen to fade from the prisoner's soul.

He was being led away when the quick eyes of Joe Bundy detected his hand as it moved swiftly to his mouth, and in an instant his grip was at his throat.

A silver bullet, which the captive was in the act of swallowing, was thrown out into the Yankee's hand, and he held it up to Red Hawk with a smile.

"I guess this will do the talking for you, Bill," he said, with a malicious grin. "We'll postpone our angel-making for a spell, and see what the paper says."

Once more Oriole Bill was taken back to where Merle and his band sat on their steeds, and the bullet was handed over to the Boy Rancher.

A light was struck, the bullet unscrewed, and the following minute the young hero was reading as follows:

"CAPTAIN PEDRO:—

"I send this by Oriole Bill to you. Mustang Merle is on the war-path, and his whole band have taken an oath not to stop till your career is ended. I expect he will find you in camp at the Raven Rocks. Old Major Pintado is up in arms over the looting of his ranch; but he is harmless. A thousand thanks for the lot you sent me. Don't let the boy rancher and his pards beat you in this game. JUAN."

"Juan?" said Old Joe. "That must be the yellow rascal I knocked down at the last fandango in Tagus City."

Bill's eyes said, in spite of his efforts to remain cool: "It's the same man, Joe."

"What do you say now?" asked Mustang Merle, looking up into the face of the convicted spy.

"What kin he say?" laughed Old Joe Bundy. For a moment Bill, who had been allowed to retain his horse ever since his capture, looked nonplused.

The silver bullet had convicted him; there was no mistake about this, and death awaited him if he did not effect his escape.

All at once, falling suddenly forward to escape the hands of Joe and Red Hawk, he dug his heels into the flanks of his steed, which shot away like an arrow.

In a moment he had vanished.

Twenty revolvers had been drawn, but the hand of Merle held back every trigger.

"No noise now," he cried. "We may be too near the foe; but that man must not escape."

Already Joe Bundy and the Apache were in hot pursuit.

The ranchers heard the sounds of their horses' hoofs, but not for long.

By and by Old Joe came riding back.

"Where is the messenger?" asked the Boy Rancher.

"Whar they don't sing about goin' back ter Alabama," said Joe, with a grin, as he took his place at Merle's side, and waited for Red Hawk to come up.

CHAPTER XII.

A YELLOW DOG'S MISSION.

TAGUS CITY, like many places of its class, was not a very healthy point for those who did not do as its people desired.

It was the home of many a desperado who afterward died with his boots on, and now and then the figure of Prince Pedro was to be seen on its streets, or among its gaming-dens.

Juan, the person whose name was signed to the note which had been found screwed into the silver bullet, was one of the numerous citizens of Tagus City, and it was from there that he sent Oriole Bill to his master with the warning which, as we have seen, had cost the singing desperado his life.

This Juan was a yellow fellow, said to be more than half-Mexican, as wiry as a cat, and fond of doing just the sort of tricks we have witnessed.

It was generally believed that he was in league with Prince Pedro, for after a successful raid by the War Saddles Juan would be flush, and would not stop until he had lost his pile at the tables of the camp.

When he sent the message to Prince Pedro he expected another reward for his trouble, and would have received it if his warning had reached its destination.

Juan—if the rascal had another name he had never told it—was seated in a low cabin in Tagus City, laughing over the trick he had played last.

"If the Prince Pedro gets my message in time to meet Mustang Merle I will get a share of the spoil when the ranch is plundered, as it will be," he was saying to himself. "I've struck it rich letting Pedro know where the feast is and

when the enemy intend to take his trail. The result is that they have never caught him, and so long as I can warn him and rake in coin I will live in clover."

Juan had the yellow skin of a genuine Greaser, and when he had concluded his talk he arose and went out.

It was the night after the events of the last chapter and he had heard nothing from his messenger.

Presently there came down the street a man who wore riding boots which told that he had been in the saddle.

"Juan?" he said, and the yellow sport came to a sudden halt and suddenly threw one hand toward his hip.

"Oh, is it you?" he said a moment later, and then went forward and shook hands with the person who had spoken his name.

It was Prince Pedro.

"You got my message?" queried Juan.

"I got none."

"But I sent it—last night—by Oriole Bill."

"I did not get it, I say."

Juan seemed to lose color.

"I told him to go to the Raven Rock and that he would find you somewhere in that neighborhood."

"It is strange," mused Prince Pedro. "I have seen nothing of my mocking bird."

"Do you think—"

"That he could have fallen into bad hands?"

"Yes, Prince Pedro."

"I can't say."

"I warned you in the letter that the Boy Rancher and his pards had taken to the war trail—that they have sworn to hunt you down and not to turn back to Mesquite until they had accomplished their mission."

"So that was the letter, eh?" said Prince Pedro.

"It told the truth."

The king of border robbers looked away and was seen to smile.

"What a splendid chance to turn the tables on this young fellow and apply the torch to Mesquite!"

"A magnificent chance," smiled Juan.

"But the girl is not there."

"Why not?"

"I have learned that a woman swooped down upon the ranch and carried her off."

"A woman?"

"Juanita."

"Why should she want to steal Nelly, as I believe they call her?"

"Juan, there are some things you have never found out," said the bandit with another laugh.

"Juanita has all the reason in the world to get possession of Nelly."

"A mystery, eh?"

"May be so."

"She is as pretty as a tizress—Juanita, I mean," said Juan. "She can shoot, too."

"I know that. I have seen her shoot since I saw you last. Two bullets, one after the other, before you could say 'Jack Robinson.' I felt the wind of each one, and the third nearly finished my career."

"She has no friendly feeling for you, Prince Pedro."

"I should say not. But, Juan, I have work for you."

"For me, captain?"

"So I have. You know where the Twin Caves are?"

There was no reply, but the look Juan gave Prince Pedro told him that he knew.

"Well, I want you to go to that place and investigate a mystery for me."

The man with Mexican blood seemed to shrink within himself.

"There is no danger to a man who knows the caves and trails of the region as you do. What I want is this: In one of those two caverns, I can't say which one, is said to be an iron chest—"

"What, do you believe that story, Prince Pedro?"

"Wait till I am through," said the bandit, sternly. "That chest is said to have been buried years ago by a man who came out here and who disappeared as suddenly as he made his appearance."

"An old story!"

"Never mind that. This man was said to be a rich money king from the East who committed a crime there by which he robbed the heirs of a large estate of an enormous sum of gold. There were complications which I need not explain now, Juan. The chest would tell the whole story if it could be found. I have not time to look for it now. I want to keep this Mustang Merle and his pards from getting the best of me. I once thought I had blown them to pieces,

but somehow or other they escaped and will give me some trouble if I don't take care of my own campaign. You know the exact location of those caverns. You will go in search of the iron chest."

Juan was about to refuse, when he seemed to think that to do so would be to lose the friendship of the villain whom he had served so long.

"I'll go, but I tell you that, in my humble opinion, the story of the chest amounts to nothing," he said.

"I believe that the chest exists. In fact, Juan, to be plain, there was an iron chest brought into this region by a certain man. It contains a very important family secret, and I must know it."

Juan, the yellow, drew back and for a moment looked at the man before him.

"When must I go?" he asked.

"At once. The sooner the chest is found the better."

"But I invade Juanita's territory."

"Of course you will be on the lookout for that woman."

"I would be a fool if I didn't keep my eyes open."

"That is all you will have to do, Juan, and I know you will do that. Find the chest and come to me with the news of the discovery."

Ten minutes later the bandit of the Southwest rode out of Tagus City, scowled at by Juan who did not at all like his mission.

"That iron chest holds the secret of Juanita's marriage and all about the girl's birth," he said aloud to himself. "I will send Juan after it and I could not send a better ferret. He knows the Twin Caves for he has been to them time and again, and if the chest is there he will find it."

When Juan went back to his little shanty he was ill at ease.

It was apparent that he did not like the task before him. But by and by he saddled his horse, but not until he had written something on a bit of dirty paper which he hid where it was apt to be found by a careful search of the cabin, and stole out into the night.

League after league, Juan, the yellow, left behind him. The only thing that seemed to goad him on was the expectation of reward which would follow his success.

"Let me find the chest and I am fixed for life!" he said. "Prince Pedro seems to desire it above the spoil of the ranches, and I am the man to find it if it is to be found."

Daylight was near at hand when he rode down a little valley and left it for some hills on the other side.

He stopped and looked on every side. The Twin Caves were near at hand and he was about to enter them.

After a while he led his horse into a dense thicket and proceeded on foot.

Soon he found himself in dense darkness, but striking a light he went on and reached a small chamber which looked as though it had been cut out of solid stone. Holding the torch above his head, he went down a flight of natural steps and peered into the gloom which even his light could not penetrate.

"I have never trusted myself far enough to lower my body into the abyss," he muttered. "If the chest is anywhere it must be down there. I am going to see."

He now unwound a long cord which he had brought with him and fastening one end to a rock near by, climbed over the fringe of the pit and went down.

The match he struck at the bottom of the place showed him a round chamber, and the next second a cry burst from his throat.

"I have found it! By Jericho, the iron chest is not a myth!"

He had cleared the space between him and the wall with a single bound and bent above a small iron box covered with rust.

The yellow dog's mission had not failed.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE HOT ATTACK.

PRINCE PEDRO had gone back to his men confident that Juan would find the iron chest which held the secret he wanted.

Now that he knew that Mustang Merle had taken the trail, he expected to have some hot work, for he felt that the young ranch king would not turn back until they had met and settled old scores.

When he reached his men and discovered that Oriole Bill, the messenger, had not turned up with his silver bullet, he began to believe that the singer had fallen into Merle's hands.

But of course he did not know that Joe Bundy and Red Hawk, the red-skin, had finished forever the career of the bandit bard.

Prince Pedro had barely reached his camp when a man came running from the picket line, and cried out that horsemen had been seen.

"The ranchers have come!" said the bandit.

The following instant there was a dash of horsemen down through the timber at the edge of the camp, and the air resounded with the sharp crack of fire-arms.

Mustang Merle had fallen like a wolf upon the camp!

Though taken by surprise, the bandits rallied as soon as possible and the fight went on at short range.

Winchester replied to Winchester and revolver met revolver in the shock of border battle; but despite the ferocity of the bandits, they were driven back and at last broke to escape the avenging fury of Merle and his men.

Prince Pedro found himself left almost alone, and all at once his horse, badly wounded, bore him off the field despite his wishes, and he was dragged from the strife until he was far from the disastrous spot.

Right in his front roared a mighty volume of water whose waves were crested with foam and the steed blinded by his wound was rushing toward the stream.

"Here he is!" Prince Pedro heard a voice say in his rear. "We have the prince of border devils at last!"

Down upon him came the speaker of these words, and one look back showed him that he would soon be upon him with cocked weapon.

"Better be drowned than have one's brains blown out," said the bandit king through clinched teeth, and the next second he had struck his steed with the spur and sent the mad animal to the very fringe of the river's bank.

"Heaven, we have lost him!" cried one of the riders, coming up just as horse and rider went over the bank, for Prince Pedro took the fatal plunge and was engulfed beneath the raging waves.

Joe Bundy turned back to report. He believed that he had witnessed the death of the man they had hunted and was anxious to tell Merle that Pedro was no more.

The old scout should have waited on the bank of the stream for he would have witnessed a sight that would have kept him from Merle a while longer.

The undercurrent had swept Prince Pedro under one of the high banks, and instead of remaining under the water, the bandit drew himself up on the shore and crept back under the projecting rocks.

"They think me dead," he said, with joy. "I am dead for the time to Mustang Merle and his men, but I will pay them back for this attack and massacre. I wonder if any of my men escaped? I want to find the iron chest which I sent Juan after, and with that in my hands I will play a game worth playing. I can enlist a new company of men at any time. The Southwest is full of just such men as I need, and I will get another lot. Perhaps I can pick up a few of my old men, for I noticed that they were beginning to get out of the fight when my horse ran off, and I know where to find them."

All the next day he lay under the sheltering rocks. Now and then he would hear voices above him, but they kept him all the closer, for he knew that Merle's men were still on the hunt as if there was a doubt of his death.

Let us see if this was the case.

When Joe Bundy came back with the report of what he had seen the Boy Rancher listened with a smile at his lips.

"Prince Pedro has been 'dead' more than once, Joe," he said. "He has been shot a score of times, but always got over it. I believe he was once hanged and left with the noose around his neck—that was in Mexico—but the next night he swooped down upon the hacienda of the man who had hanged him and treated him to the same rope. We must search the vicinity to-morrow and see if he did not escape us after all."

So the noises which the hidden bandit heard while he hugged the dark walls of his retreat were made by Merle and his men and they did not relinquish the hunt until they were apparently convinced that the robber had gone to his death beneath the waters of the river.

When night came again Prince Pedro pulled himself out of the uncanny place and crawled up the high bank.

His horse was lost. Black Lightning would carry him to no more deeds of violence and he would have to steal a new steed.

He made his way down the stream until he

reached a trail which his keen eyes discerned and then he struck inland.

An hour later, looking quite unlike his former self, he appeared at the door of a cabin whose owner, a little old man, did not recognize him.

There he heard the result of the fight.

The old man told him that of all Prince Pedro's band but three had escaped; that the leader of the bandits had been drowned in the river; bad news for him, but it made him smile so that he had to turn his face away to escape being seen.

"I am dead, sure enough," he thought and then spoke to the man.

"You have a horse, Morgan?"

"Yes; one of the best in the country, too."

"Is he for sale?"

"He is not."

"But you would take for him twice his value?"

"I couldn't think of doing that."

"I would like to see this famous horse that cannot be bought."

Morgan, the settler, led the way to the little stable that adjoined the shanty and Prince Pedro feasted his eyes on one of the finest steeds he had seen in months.

"You say you won't part with him?" he said.

Morgan looked at the ragged man at his side.

"Why, you haven't money enough to buy one hair of his coat," he answered, in tones of derision.

"But I have strength enough to take him without money," was the instant retort, and Morgan was hurled against the logs of the stable in such a manner as to break nearly every bone in his body.

"Don't take the horse," he groaned. "He saved my life once—"

"That's just what I want him to do for me," was the reply, and unconsciousness came to the old man.

Prince Pedro saddled the steed and was soon out on the open again.

He rode back over the ground of the fight and saw for himself evidences of the terrible defeat which his men had received at Mustang Merle's hands.

"Vengeance for this, my boy!" he exclaimed. "I will show you that Prince Pedro has as many lives as a cat. I won't forget you, Joe Bundy, nor the young Indian who has been the friend of the ranch through thick and thin. I have something for all. Just give me a little time."

Meantime the victors of the fight had ridden back with the news of the extermination of the bandit band.

"We look for Nelly now, don't we?" asked Larry Blair, looking up into Merle's triumphant face.

"Yes, Larry. The hunt for Nelly the lost begins at once."

And it did.

Not many hours after the victory Merle and Larry might have been seen in a bit of timber closely examining a horse's track which showed itself in a soft part of the trail.

"This is queer to me," said the Boy Rancher. "You see the curious print of the shoe? Well, it belongs to no horse but the one, old Morgan owns."

"Old Morgan?"

"A little old hermit-like man who lives across the country and whose pride is a magnificent steed which he loves as he loves life itself. But just why it should be here at this time is what puzzles me."

Merle and Larry rode off and soon came in sight of Morgan's shanty.

"Hello, Joseph?" cried the young rancher, halting in front of the hut.

There was no reply.

Mustang Merle sprang from the saddle and opened the door; but no face greeted him.

From the house they went to the stable where to their horror they found the body of Morgan nearly where Prince Pedro had left it.

"The horse has been taken and the owner killed!" cried Merle, bending over the corpse.

"That is very plain, Captain Merle; but what is that in one of the hands?"

The hand of the Boy Rancher moved swiftly toward the closed fingers designated by Larry, and after some work, opened them.

A piece of crumpled paper dropped out.

"It seems to be a leaf from the old hermit's diary; but he has scrawled something on the other side, and there is the stub of a pencil in one hand."

Mustang Merle sprang to the light and looked at the paper he had taken from the dead.

"Heavens! can the old man have written the truth?" he exclaimed. "Listen to this, Larry."

He read:

"The man who took the horse was Prince Pedro. I recognized him at the last moment. I pray that whoever finds this will avenge us. MORGAN."

"Escaped!" cried the young man. "Then, we are still on the war-path, Merle."

The eyes of the boy owner of Mesquite fairly glowed with excitement.

"Still on the war-path, Larry. The river did not engulf the wolf of the plains."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRAIL OF THE OLD PARDS.

WHILE Mustang Merle and Larry Blair were making the startling discovery we have just recorded, Joe Bundy and his inseparable companion, Red Hawk, were exploring in another field, but one none the less exciting.

The hunt was now for Nelly Nevins, who had been so mysteriously kidnapped from Mesquite Ranch.

The two friends were in a different part of the country from that in which we left Merle and the girl's lover, and were nearing the famous Twin Caves.

This place was not far from where they had lost Juanita, the Hermit Queen, and when they reached the mouth of the Twin Caves, they plunged in and found themselves in dense darkness.

"Look! a light!" suddenly exclaimed Joe, grasping the Indian's arm while he pointed ahead.

Sure enough, a light was moving down what seemed to be a corridor some distance away, and for a few moments they stood and watched it.

At last it disappeared altogether, and the two were nonplused.

"Some one is ahead of us," said Old Joe at the red-skin's ear.

"Yes, white brother."

They waited, but the light did not come back, and presently they pushed on again.

"I've got to strike another light," said a voice so near the pair that they fell back, and with difficulty repressed a cry.

All at once there flashed up a tiny light which revealed a tall man with a small box in his arms.

The box seemed very heavy, notwithstanding its size, and the moment Joe saw the man he said to Red Hawk:

"It is Juan, the yellow—the bound who has been helping Prince Pedro."

The immovable Indian made no reply, but continued to glare at the half blood as he came down the passage with the box in his arms.

"Don't let the rascal hide that box where we can't find it," whispered the Yankee. "I'm thinking it is something precious, else it wouldn't be here."

Red Hawk was crouching like a leopard, with his eyes riveted upon Juan, the yellow, and all at once he sprang from Joe's side, and as the match went out there was a cry of sudden terror, and the man whose throat he had caught, recoiled, but did not escape.

"You always land yer fish, don't you?" laughed Old Joe, coming up with a light of his own, and holding it so close to the man's face that the rascal begged him to remove it.

"What's in the box?" asked Joe.

"How do I know when I haven't opened it?"

"But you knew it was yer?"

"I didn't. I came across it accidentally."

Joe looked down at the little box and smiled.

"Diamonds, Juan?" he grinned.

"Open it and see."

"Hold yer prisoner, Red Hawk. Don't let him have an inch of string, or he will be off like a pot-leg."

The Indian shook his head and the red fingers seemed to sink deeper than ever into the yellow throat of the man who had been caught.

Joe now felt to examining the find, which did not seem to have any keyhole.

"Locked up for keeps!" he observed. "You haven't got the combination about you, Juan?"

A scowl was the answer he got.

"We'll take the whole catch to the light," Joe said at last. "I say, Juan, who told you this box was yer?"

No answer.

"You couldn't choke him a little, could you, Red Hawk?"

The next instant the eyes of the yellow dog seemed to be starting from his head, to the intense delight of the young Apache, who seemed to like the task.

"Mebbe he'll talk now. If he don't you kin tighten the screws ag'in, an' mebbe we'll leave him where he is."

Juan's throat was released, and he got his breath with an effort.

"Who told you, Juan?"
 "Prince Pedro."
 "Hol that gentleman whose band we wiped out last night?"
 Juan started a little.
 "Wiped out?" he said.
 "Annihilated! The bull band went down before the avengin' rifles of Mesquite, and Pedro himself was lost in the current of Rocky River. So you've got no pard any more, Juan."
 The bandit's spy was silent.
 "So Pedro told you this box war hyer, eh?"
 "Yes."
 "An' sent you ter git it?"
 "He did."
 "What did he say it contained?"
 "He didn't go that far."
 "Was afraid ter trust you, was he, Juan?"
 "I didn't ask to be trusted with any secret."
 "But you undertook to find the box, eh?"
 "I did."
 "Did you have ter hunt long?"
 "Not very."
 "Who left this box hyer?"
 "A man who came into this country years ago."

Joe and the Indian exchanged swift glances.
 "You've heard the young chap's story, Red Hawk," said Joe. "You know what he said about a lost lot of papers that brought Nevins nither? Mobbe they're in thar," and Joe kicked the box smartly.
 "It's iron," remarked Juan.
 "Yes," I see that, and if it was empty it would still be very heavy. I guess that's the box that holds the secret for which Nevins left home with Larry and the girl."
 "If you say so it doesn't belong to me. I don't want any other people's property."
 "When did you get that way, Juan?" laughed the last of the Bundys, with a twinkle in his eyes. "You don't want anything that's not yours, ha?"
 "That's what I said."

Joe now picked up the box and told Red Hawk to lead the way toward the mouth of the cavern.
 Juan was conducted on down the passage and at last the three stood at the opening.

"We don't want yer miserable life. Somebody not so choicy will take it one of these days. You are free, Juan."

The man from Tagus City could hardly believe that his life had been spared, and when he realized that it was he touched his hat to the two hunters and bowed.

"No thanks," said Joe. "I don't want you around. I have a mind to serve you like I did at the fandango, but I won't. Get out of our sight!"

Juan slunk back to where he had left his horse, but that animal had broken his tether and decamped, whereupon he cursed at a lively rate and wished he had seen the hunters first.

Joe and Red Hawk went back to their own steed and the iron box was strapped upon the back of the Yankee's horse.

"It's a find, Red Hawk," said the old scout. "I fancy that the young couple will open their eyes when they peep into the chest. You know Larry said there was a certain mystery about Nelly's past—something concerning her mother. You know she was persecuted by a rascal who ran away with some documents which established her marriage with Nelly's father and a whole lot of stuff like that—too much fer me ter get into my noggin all at once, but I guess Merle understood it all from the way he listened."

"Shall we try to break open the box?" asked the Indian.

"Guess we'd better not," was the reply. "Then we'd better bury it somewhere while we hunt for the lost girl."

"That's a capital idea. The box is too heavy ter carry on a hoss and we might lose it somehow. Bury it! That's just what we'll do," and Old Joe turned aside and rode down the path until he reached a spot which he seemed to know well.

"Nobody ever comes hyer," he said to his companion.

"Not even the wolf?"

"I guess not. I never saw even a snake on this spot. Here we'll hide the box till we've found the gal, when we'll come and git it."

Joe took the box from the saddle and carried it into the dense brushwood of the place where they had halted.

The Indian with his eagle eye on the alert stood on guard.

After awhile the lank figure of the Yankee

was seen coming back, a smile on his leathery face.

"Buried she is and no one saw me but a cricket and it was killed when I turned to come away."

"Then we go back to the girl's trail."

Joe and Red Hawk turned back, but did not see the pair of eyes already fastened upon them.

If they had looked up at the trails overhead they might have seen the figure that stood half-concealed by a heap of rocks with a pair of keen orbs as dark as the raven's plumage watching them as they moved away.

After awhile the owner of these eyes came down and stopped at the edge of the little thicket.

"What did the old man hide in here? He seemed to carry something heavy in his arms; but what could it have been?"

Into the thicket dodged the speaker and was lost to sight.

Come back, Joe Bundy, and look after your treasure. Come back or it may not be here when you return.

The old man comes not. He and the young Apache have gone to other adventures and the person who has entered the thicket scrapes away some leaves and dry pine-cones and discovers that the ground has recently been disturbed.

The box so important to Nelly Nevins is on the eve of discovery.

CHAPTER XV.

BACK IN TAGUS CITY.

WITH the War Saddles practically destroyed Mesquite Ranch was in no danger of being plundered, therefore its young owner and his friends could take the trail of the man whose name had been a terror of the country so long and who was connected in some manner with Nelly Nevins's history.

Prince Pedro, knowing nothing of the discovery which Mustang Merle and Larry had made in the stable attached to Morgan's little ranch, had left the immediate vicinity of his last crime, and, mounted on the stolen horse, had gone to see if Juan had succeeded in finding the iron chest.

He reached the Twin Caves but concluding that Juan had gone back to Tagus City, rode in that direction and entered the place so well disguised that he was not recognized.

Not only had he altered his own looks but he had changed the looks of Morgan's horse; had even removed the shoes that had led Merle to the ranch.

Juan had not come back, and for a moment Prince Pedro thought his man had deceived him.

It was the night after the last events recorded when the robber-tough stood leaning against one of the walls of Tagus City's most famous gambling dens.

He was looking at a game then in progress at one of the tables when a person came in and looked over the players.

He knew that news of his defeat and a story of his own death was current in the place and of course he had said nothing to contradict the latter.

When he looked up and encountered the eye of the man who had come in he started.

One of his old band stood before him!

Prince Pedro saw at once that despite his disguise he had been recognized and made a signal bidding the man to hold his peace.

He made it too late, however, for all at once the bandit came down the aisle and cried:

"Well, thar's two of us what didn't get our everlasting from the Boy Rancher. Give me your hand, captain—"

Prince Pedro instantly put on a bold face.

"Who are you calling captain?" he cried.

"Why, you, of course."

"If you take me to be the villain Prince Pedro, who was lost in the waters of Rocky River, you have made a mistake. I'm Jack Jessup, from Trinidad."

The hasty bandit had by this time caught what his old leader was after, and hastened to come to his aid.

"I guess you're right, stranger," he said in apologetic tones. "I haven't had my mind since I got a bullet along the skull in the fight. Won't you take something, Mr. Jessup?"

Prince Pedro walked to the bar with his old companion in arms.

"How many of you escaped?" he asked.

"I guess we're the only two." It was a clean wine-out.

The bandit king swallowed his drink and walked out, followed by the War Saddle.

"I've found the girl," said the man, laying his hand on Prince Pedro's arm.

"No!"

"I have, for a fact."

"Where is she?"

"Over among the hills. But she was a prisoner."

"Whose prisoner?"

"Juanita's."

For a moment Prince Pedro seemed thunder-struck.

"How did you find this out, Logan?"

"By accident. I was still on the run when I saw Juanita come out of a cavern. I waited till she was off some distance, when I took it into my head to see what was in the underground nest. In I went, and to my surprise discovered that the cabin was still inhabited."

A gleam of victory came into Prince Pedro's eye.

"This is worth a thousand and more to me, Logan. We will go at once."

"To where the girl is?"

"Where do you think she is?"

"Where you left her, of course."

"Wrong. I stole her from the stealer."

Prince Pedro fell back, and stared at the man before him.

"So much the better," he said at last. "Logan, you are worth your weight in gold. Nelly is mine at last!"

"Yours?" cried Logan.

"No; I will take that back. She is not mine until we have outwitted Mustang Merle and his men."

"But you are dead to them, Captain Pedro. The river saved you."

"I hope so, but one cannot tell."

Logan looked toward the open door of the place they had just left, and saw standing there in the light the figure of a man.

"Look yonder!" he cried. "As I live, it is Juan."

"So it is," cried Prince Pedro, turning back, and the next moment he had shaken hands with the yellow dog of a Juan.

"The box! Where is it?"

"I couldn't find it."

"What! could not find it when it was in the cavern?"

"That is what I've just said."

"Juan, you have lied! I can tell when you stretch the truth," and the hand of Prince Pedro closed on the fellow's wrist. "Here, Logan; come up!"

Logan, with revolver drawn, sprung to his leader's side.

Together the two marched Juan away, and did not stop until they had conducted him to the edge of the town.

"You found the box!" hissed Prince Pedro.

The man began to stammer.

Logan placed the muzzle of the revolver against the yellow temple.

"Count three mentally, Logan," said the robber. "If at the end of the count he doesn't admit that he is lying, touch the trigger."

"I shall."

The touch of that merciless pistol was like the cold hand of the dead.

"I found the box," said Juan.

"I thought so."

"But I lost it again."

"No lies, Juan."

"I am telling none now. I lost the box. That long villain and his pard came upon me as I was carrying it from the cave and despoiled me. I had to give it up or be shot to death."

The impress of the truth was in the man's voice and Prince Pedro saw that the threat of the revolver would get nothing else out of him.

"So they robbed you?" he said.

"Joe Bundy and Red Hawk."

"It is a wonder that they let you go."

"They believe you dead, so what was the use of keeping me?"

Juan next asseverated the entire correctness of his story, and gave such a minute description of the box that Prince Pedro knew that he had found it.

"We must find that chest," he said to Logan.

"Not another hour in Tagus for me."

"But the beauty of the ranch, captain?"

"We kill two birds with one stone. Come!"

Without so much as thanking Juan for the information he had given, the two War Saddles turned away.

"May you find more than you want," cried Juan, shaking his fist after them. "I hope you will find Mustang Merle or the Hermit Queen of the Hills. I risked my life to find the box and you haven't thanked me for doing so, even though I lost it afterward."

Juan tramped toward the saloon, but was sud-

denly stopped by a man who overtook him near the door.

"Who was that tall man, Juan?"

"Prince Pedro," snapped the spy.

"But I thought he was dead."

"Not he. I'd like to see you kill that rascal."

With a singular smile on his face the strange man walked into the well-lighted place and shouted:

"Gentlemen, Prince Pedro, the biggest rascal of these parts, has just walked out of camp. The story about his death at the hands of Mustang Merle's men is not true. I move that we declare him outlawed. I have just come from Morgan's ranch. The old man is dead and his fine horse stolen. There is no doubt that Prince Pedro did the job."

In an instant fifty men were on their feet clamoring to be heard.

"Outlaw the rascal!" "Hunt him down!" "Let Tagus City take the field!" "Revive the Black Court of last year!"

For a moment the confusion was such that no one could be understood.

"I move that a decree of outlawry be passed against Prince Pedro!" cried a man who mounted the counter.

All looked at him. It was Juan.

The spy had turned against his master.

"All you who are in favor of the decree of outlawry will say 'ay.'"

A chorus of responses went up and the men surged toward the counter.

"Gentlemen, I am going to deal with that man!"

These words were pronounced clear and distinct above the roar of voices.

Everybody turned toward the door.

A youth had ridden his black horse into the establishment and sat the saddle like a young king. He was seen by every one.

"I am on the war-path. I claim the right to deal with the man called Prince Pedro!"

The speaker was Mustang Merle.

CHAPTER XVI.

SOMETHING OF THE PAST.

MUSTANG MERLE never looked handsomer than when he faced the startled pards of Tagus City and announced from the saddle that he was on the war-path and claimed the right to deal with Prince Pedro.

"Take him, Merle!" cried a dozen voices. "We turn him over to you, for you never fail at anything you undertake."

"Thanks, gentlemen," answered the young rancher, doffing his hat. "I will attend to this business to the satisfaction of all. There shall be no failure," and he threw a handful of coin toward the counter, which was received with cheers, and while the toughs of Tagus were crowding forward to drink his health, he turned and rode out.

By this time Prince Pedro and Logan had reached a spot some distance from the town and were proceeding through the hills.

"Don't miss the place where you left the girl after robbing Juanita," said the bandit. "I can make my own terms, with the fair creature in my hands."

"Terms with whom?" asked Logan.

"With the enemy, to be sure."

Both men laughed, but there was a lurking look in Logan's eye and it did not quit it, for some time.

Two hours later the border pards came to a trail which the keen eyes of Logan recognized, for he turned into it and was followed by Prince Pedro.

"Here we are," said the guide, stopping at last at the foot of a hill.

"Another of those caves?"

Logan nodded.

"I don't know what we would do without them," he said. "They come handy to hunted persons sometimes, as well as do the hunters many a favor."

The men dismounted and hid their steeds near by while they entered the cavern.

"Merciful Father! you here?" cried a young girl, falling back from before the man who suddenly confronted her.

"Why not?" grinned Prince Pedro. "You got the best of us at the ranch, but here I happen to have the upper hand."

Nelly Nevins said nothing for a moment, but turned upon Logan, whom she eyed coldly for a little while.

"I owe the introduction of this wretch to you, I suppose," she said.

"You do, miss."

"You rescued me from the woman called Juanita, to get me into the clutches of Prince Pedro."

"I had to bring the captain to see you."

The interior of the cave was lit up by a lamp that hung along the wall—a lamp found in one of the dark recesses by Logan, showing that at a certain time the cavern had had another tenant.

"What is it you want?"

Nelly had taken a step toward Prince Pedro, and was facing him with all the true dignity of a queen.

"Whose child are you, girl?"

"I am a Nevins. Is not that enough?"

"Where is your mother?"

"You ask me as though there were a stain on my name."

"I ask for information."

"It is false! You can answer the questions you have asked better than I can, Prince Pedro. You know more about my parentage than you want to tell. Look here. What ever became of Junius Powell?"

Despite the effort put forth by Prince Pedro not to start at mention of any name that might fall from Nelly's lips, he could not remain a stoic.

"Answer me, will you?" continued the fair girl. "Look me in the eye and tell me what became of the man who persecuted my mother until she lost her reason, and fled from one of the best homes in the East."

The bandit of the Southwest looked toward the entrance, and waved his hand at Logan, who sullenly fell back.

"You have asked me for something you shall have," he said, addressing Nelly. "You seem to want to know the past, and you shall know it."

The girl's face grew white.

"I am ready for the story of the past. I am waiting for the first words of the narrative."

"Years ago—I need not say how many—there lived in a certain city east of the Mississippi a man who had obtained by means not accounted altogether honest a large sum of money. His family consisted of wife and child, the latter then a babe in the cradle. This man hated another person who knew a secret concerning his life, and one night the secret-keeper was found murdered in an alley. The detectives of the day took up the scent and would have tracked the murderer down if he had not abandoned home and fled.

"His wife, a haughty woman, tried to buy off the detectives, and at last left, too, but she abandoned her child—left it in the cradle and fled in the night. What became of the man who had killed the holder of the secret? Whither fled the woman who knew that her husband was guilty of murder?"

Prince Pedro, standing with folded arms before Nelly, paused a moment for breath and saw the eyes of the young girl fastened upon him.

"Why don't you go on?" she said.

"Give me time. Years passed and it was rumored that the criminal came back and died in the city, but the wife has never been discovered. Why, it was said she ran off with a man who had her heart before she first met her husband."

"That is false!" cried Nelly, stamping her foot on the ground. "I am here to shield the name of my mother, Prince Pedro!"

"Your mother, eh?" laughed the ruffian, leaning forward.

"Yes, the name of my mother. She was persecuted by the wretch called Junius Powell. I have heard of the killing from my Uncle Abner whom you sent across the Waterless Plain. In the first place, my father was not guilty of that crime. It would have been fastened upon him, however, owing to the surrounding circumstances. He came back to the city and died there, but under an assumed name."

"Changed his name, did he? I thought the name of Nevins was such an honored one!"

The young girl bit her lip with indignation.

"He changed his name for his child's sake, for he wanted to be near me. Junius Powell was a thief as well as a murderer. He fled the city himself and took with him some papers which not only established my father's innocence, but fixed the true date of my mother's marriage, thereby clearing her name of a stain which his lying lips had tried to cast upon it."

"You seem to know as much as I do about the past, yet you asked me for the story," smiled the bandit.

"I wanted to hear what you would say," was the answer. "I wanted to know how you would tell the story which you know in all its details."

"Why should I know it?"

"Yes, why?" cried Nelly. "Of all men you should know the truth about the past which is so closely connected with my history."

At this juncture Logan came back with a curious look on his face.

He and the bandit captain exchanged looks and Prince Pedro joined his man.

"I want to show you something," whispered Logan.

The two left the cave and Logan led Prince Pedro along the trail a short distance.

Beneath them ran another trail which was barely discernible in the starlight and the chief of the War Saddles felt his hand pressed as Logan pointed downward.

"They are looking for us," he said at the bandit's ear.

"Who are they?"

"Joe and Red Hawk?"

Prince Pedro, with his revolver half drawn, bent over the fringe of the trail and looked at the figures gliding a few feet below them.

"I could kill both in half a second," Logan heard him say. "I have them at my mercy. Why not?"

But he withheld his fire, though he scowled at the men with the ferocity of a tiger.

Slowly the deadly weapon was lowered over the path and Old Joe's head was covered.

Prince Pedro seemed to gloat over the triumph he had at his command by pressing the trigger, and Logan waited for the shot.

"They may not be alone," said Prince Pedro, rising and looking at his companion. "Mustang Merle may be near and a shot, no matter how deadly, might betray us."

Five minutes later the two pards on the lower trail were seen to move on and their lives had been spared.

"Come back to the beauty of the cavern," said Prince Pedro. "No; stand guard here, Logan. I won't be gone long."

Nelly started when she saw coming back through the lamplight the figure of the man she despised.

"I had two of your friends at the muzzle of my revolver, yet I spared them," he said.

"That is more than Junius Powell did when he had Theodosia Nevins in his clutches," was the reply.

Prince Pedro burst into a laugh and came toward the girl.

"It is always Junius Powell with you," he cried. "Can't you think of no one else?"

"I can't forget the ruin that man wrought. His infamous lies broke up what was the happiest home under the Stars and Stripes. We came down here to find him and try and wrench from him the truth which would vindicate my parents' honor."

"Well, do you ever expect to find him?"

In reply Nelly almost bounded up to the bandit king and halting before him, covered him suddenly with a quivering finger.

"I have found him! I need look no further!" she exclaimed.

The next instant a sharp report rung out and Logan ran into the cave, and throwing up his hands with a wild cry, pitched forward dead!

Prince Pedro caught the lamp from the wall and dashed it to the ground.

As it struck, all became dark.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE RIDE FOR LIFE.

THE shot so unexpected seemed to paralyze the young girl.

The falling of the man to the floor, and the extinguishing of the only light that enabled her to see what was going on, seemed simultaneous.

In another instant the hand of Prince Pedro gripped her wrist, and she was lifted from the ground.

"Silence!" was whispered in her ear. "You will know more about the mystery of the past if you keep a still tongue in your head."

That she was in the grip of the man she most despised she did not doubt, and when she found herself being carried through the dense darkness that prevailed, terror rendered her speechless.

Prince Pedro had barely quitted the place when there dashed into it a person whose hands drew a match across the wall, and the room was partly revealed by the light of a match.

Juanita!

The Hermit Queen of the Hills stood for a moment and stared at the body at her feet.

"One of the villain's men!" she said, bending over Logan and holding the light close to the dark face. "He was on guard and I was afraid I would lose him. Where is his master?"

She saw then the lamp which the bandit king

had dashed to the ground, and turned toward that portion of the cavern into which Prince Pedro had fled with his captive.

What a splendid target she would have afforded for the aim of the man whose life she wanted.

"Have I lost him again?" she cried. "Can it be that he has escaped me after all these years of hunting? Prince Pedro, I have longed to pay you back for the infamous work of the past. I will not lose you, even if I have to search every nook and cranny of this cavern. I know the secret places of this region. You have forced me to hide among these hills, and it is for vengeance that I have lived here."

The match went out and she struck another.

When it had blazed up she sprung over the body of the dead bandit and plunged into the first corridor that met her gaze.

It was the same which Prince Pedro had taken.

But what had become of the man who was playing the last desperate game of the many played before?

Prince Pedro, following the winding of the underground passage, and dragging after him the beautiful prisoner captured by Logan's help, went deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth.

Nelly said nothing, as if waiting in silence for deliverance.

"Do you know this accursed cave?" he said at last.

"No. If I had there might have been an escape."

"We will outwit the person who stretched Logan dead on the ground. There lives not the one who is to baffle Prince Pedro."

"When did you take that name?"

The bandit's answer was a coarse laugh.

"Men take any name that suits them in this country," he said. "We make strange trails here, and there is many a chance against one's life in the Southwest."

"The name you had was name enough—Junius Powell!"

Nelly thought she heard the mad grating of teeth in the gloom.

On, on went Prince Pedro and his captive.

All at once the bandit drew back.

"The wall has ended," he said. "There is no rock ahead. I can feel nothing."

The girl was silent.

"Dare I strike a light?"

In a moment, however, he struck one, and the girl, brave as she was, shrunk back with a cry, for the trail in the dark had terminated and a black chasm yawned before her.

"That's a close shave," grinned the bandit. "Another step and we would have fallen, Heaven knows where."

They turned aside now, into a passage which the light revealed, and kept on.

Half an hour later they stood in a large chamber, the sides of which Nelly could not touch with the hand she put out, and Prince Pedro said:

"We ought to be safe enough here. I hear nothing. I guess we have outwitted the hunters."

It seemed so.

Not a sound came to their ears, though they listened with all their might.

"Do you know who shot Logan, Nelly?"

"I do not."

"Do you think it was one of the men whose lives I spared awhile ago?"

"How should I know?"

"True. I'll tell you who dropped the last of the War Saddles, with the exception of their captain. It was the Hermit Queen of the Hills."

"Juanita?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

"I have been her prisoner. It was she who took me from Mesquite."

"She swooped down upon you like the eagle, eh? Why should she carry you off?"

"Yes, why? You know, Prince Pedro."

There was no reply, and it seemed to Nelly that the hand which had not released her for a moment sunk deeper into her flesh.

"Girl, you have yet to know something connected with the history of the past," he said at last. "The career of Prince Pedro has just begun. Do you think the Boy Rancher is to hunt him down and win the game? Such a thing is not to be. Neither is the Queen of the Hills to succeed."

"Then," thought Nelly Nevins, "I am lost, indeed."

Minutes were hours to the beauty of the Southwest.

She was now the captive of the man who knew the secret of the past.

He had not told her all, but there was much which she could guess. He had not always been Prince Pedro. There was a time when he had another name, and she thought how different her life would have been if he had never crossed her path.

By and by the big room of the underground hiding place was deserted and Prince Pedro and his captive stood beneath the stars.

"I know this region like the sailor knows the sea," he remarked, seeing a look of sudden hope in the depths of her eyes. "I can find the horses Logan and I left when we entered the cave," and he led Nelly back over the rocky ground and discovered the steeds in the thicket.

Helping Nelly into one saddle, he sprung upon the other horse and looked back over the darkened landscape.

"Do you think, after what has just happened, that they will ever get the best of Prince Pedro?" he laughed. "They will outlaw me for one little thing that happened since the battle with the ranchers. What do I care for that? I have been posted before. It is nothing for me."

Daylight found the pair in a country which was wild and strange to Nelly.

As she looked over the ground and saw the trees growing here and there, with clumps of bushes and cacti between, with no sign of succor in all the landscape, her heart seemed to sink within her.

"The border is not far off," he said. "Yonder is a new land where a thousand men might hide from the best hunters of the Southwest. A bloodhound even could not track us across those wastes. Nelly, my fair one, what think you now?"

The white lips seemed to move, but there was no audible reply.

Prince Pedro looked for a moment at the girl at his side, and then raised his head and scanned the country around them.

"You know me now?"

"I do. You are Junius Powell."

He smiled and ran his fingers through the long locks which fell to his broad shoulders.

"There was a time when a woman who looked like you would not listen to me," he said. "She has wished a thousand times since that she had not played so foolishly."

"I would almost hate her memory if I thought so," was the quick answer. "My mother regret that she would not become your bride, Prince Pedro? Never!"

The handsome bandit was looking at something that seemed to give him no little uneasiness, and Nelly watched him closely.

That something was down in the little valley which lay at their feet, and though she looked in that direction she could not see it.

"Come! Won't they never give me any rest?" he exclaimed. "But I know my horses and the trails of the Stormy Hills. Catch the yellow free-lance if you can."

The following moment the two steeds were fairly flying down the trail, and the girl was clinging to the insecure seat with all her might.

Presently she discovered that a horseman was straining every nerve to head them off. Prince Pedro saw the same person, and then another and still another came in sight.

They had been seen and were pursued!

More than once the bandit seemed on the eve of drawing rein and facing his pursuers.

"They might as well try to catch a deer," he laughed, as he gave the steeds the keen spur. "When I do turn—if they should corner me, Nelly, I will show them a trick that will halt them in the twinkling of an eye."

There was a mad meaning to the bandit's words—a meaning which the beautiful prisoner was to discover ere long, and when they came out on a cleaner trail and could look back, hope rose again in her bosom.

It seemed to her that the pursuers had gained a little, and she could make out one who was far ahead of all, riding with all his might, with his eyes fastened upon them.

"The young fool thinks he can outwit the man who is his superior!" smiled Prince Pedro. "I will show him, girl!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE DEATH COIL.

THERE had been times in the life of the bandit of the Southern border when he had been pursued as then.

More than once had he been chased by a pack of determined men whose rights he had disrespected, and whose ranches he had plundered. But now it was a terrible race for life, and if he succeeded—if he should lose it—he knew what would follow.

All this time Nelly Nevins was watching with

an interest which the reader can imagine, the riding of those who were trying to hem the plunderer in.

Now they would disappear and now, again, would come into full view, all the time riding like the wind with the one object ahead—the capture of the wild king of the saddle.

Prince Pedro saw that if he could reach a certain place among the hills, he would be safe.

A sudden bend in the trail seemed to assure him that beyond it lay safety, and driving the spurs into his steed and now and then touching the flanks of Nelly's horse, he went over the trail like an arrow.

"Halt!"

Never rung in the girl's ears a word more welcome.

The two steeds had reached the bend in the trail. They were about to turn it when the one word rung out, and Prince Pedro sent out a fierce oath in reply.

It was evident from the foaming horse ridden by the person who had called a halt that he had just reached the spot and the bandit looked over the pointed ears of his own steed into the muzzle of a Winchester.

"Mustang Merle!" cried the girl.

She could not have kept back the name if she had tried. The young owner of Mesquite sat before her on his handsome black and the finger that touched the trigger was not there for sport.

The appearance of the Boy Rancher was so sudden that the trick of which Prince Pedro had spoken was not played.

"Let the roan loose," said Merle.

There was defiance in the bandit's eye, but the menace of the leveled weapon was enough to awe him and he sullenly obeyed.

Nelly did not need a command to ride forward, for the next instant she had done so and Prince Pedro saw that the captive for whom he had played such a hand was gone.

By and by sounds of horses galloping over the trail behind him saluted his ears.

"Hooray for the young master!" cried the rider of the foremost steed and a hat went sailing into mid-air.

"I'm sorry I spared your life last night," said Prince Pedro to the shouter when he came up and presented the face of Joe Bundy.

"Thanks, Captain Pedro. You have placed the whole Bundy family under lasting obligations."

The game had failed.

Prince Pedro had fallen into the hands of the ranchers of Mesquite and Merle had kept his promise with the men of Tagus City.

Nelly was overjoyed when she met Larry who had come up, and the young lovers were exchanging stories, while the men took care of their prisoner, tying him to his horse, so that he could not give them the slip.

"Back to Mesquite!" said Mustang Merle when the pursuers had rested a spell.

Back to the ranch they went and the captive was well guarded to await his trial, while Merle dispatched a rider to Tagus to invite its citizens to a sitting of the court.

Did Prince Pedro expect mercy? No.

He knew the severe code of laws in force in the Southwest. He knew that the bandit, when caught by the men he had despoiled, was tried by a court organized on the spot and promptly executed.

The next day the men of Tagus City came over the hill and drew rein in front of the buildings.

They wore stern countenances, for the death of Morgan, and the theft of his horse had turned them against Prince Pedro more than anything else.

Juan, the yellow, came with the rest and looked his old master in the eye.

For a moment the heart of the bandit prince took hope at sight of the yellow dog.

He did not know that it was Juan who had proposed to outlaw him.

"You know your old friend," he found opportunity to whisper to the half-blood.

A strange smile lit up Juan's dark face.

"I know no Prince Pedro," said he.

The trial took place in the clearing in front of the ranch buildings.

There was not an eye to pity the man who stood bound before them all.

Prince Pedro was not to be tried for the plundering of ranches. He was not charged with having sent Abner Nevins across the Waterless Plain, a Mazeppa; but the death of old Morgan was made the crime for which a jury of twelve bronzed men were to try him for his life.

Apart from the court stood the girl who saw in him more than the bandit of the plain.

She had discovered Junius Powell, the man who had wrecked her parents' lives. He held a secret which she wanted, but would his lips reveal it before he died?

At the same time there was riding across a rough country a woman who sat her steed like an eager queen of the saddle.

Her face was turned toward Mesquite, which she was nearing with each bound of the lithe-limbed horse, and every now and then her hand would stroke the animal's heated neck, as if to encourage him to renewed efforts.

"I must get there before they deal with him!" she said. "They have no right to deal with the man of many crimes. I am the one who should be his executioner. The old debt must be paid by the hand he wronged. Forward, steed! You shall rest the rest of your life if you bring me to Mesquite in time to settle with this prince of fiends."

Nothing seemed to check the speed of that steed. On, on he went over the trail, turning the sharp places in it and bearing the avenger of the past to the border court.

At last the horse in trying to leap over a half-hidden rock fell headlong and Juanita lay in the trail half-stunned.

"It can't be that I must not see him alive," she exclaimed springing to her feet. "The horse is dead, poor fellow; but I have strength."

She ran forward and stopped on the summit of a little rise from which she could see the men gathered about another of their number just beyond the houses of the ranch.

Down the hill pushed Juanita, keeping the houses between her and Mustang Merle's court. All at once she stopped.

"I am near enough," she said. "I need not go further. If they see me some one will cheat me out of my prey. I know these toughs of the Southwest border; they don't like to be outwitted by a woman."

She was partially shielded by a tree and was now getting her breath after the run.

Prince Pedro stood in the midst of the men whose captive he was.

Juanita could see that the jury had retired to deliberate.

In a little group stood the twelve who carried in their hands the life of the man who had been the scourge of the border.

Of course she did not doubt their verdict.

Suddenly the foreman of the stalwart dozen was seen tramping back.

It seemed to the woman who was nearly consumed by an inward fire that she could have heard a leaf fall from the nearest tree.

"What is the verdict?" asked the tall judge of the tribunal.

"Guilty!"

"And the sentence?"

"Death by the rope!"

There was a disposition to cheer, but the uplifted hand of the Boy Rancher promptly suppressed it.

"I thought so," muttered Juanita. "It could not have been otherwise. The wretch deserves it."

The figure of Prince Pedro straightened before his nemesis.

A minute later three men stepped forward and the hands of one fell upon the bandit's shoulder.

"Come! You must prepare," he said.

"I am ready!"

Just then the hands of Juanita moved and she stood erect.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE END OF IT ALL.

"I MUST. The time has come!" said the Hermit Queen of the Hills.

Almost at the same moment, the figure of Nelly Nevins sprang toward the man being led to his death.

"Tell me all. Where are the papers that prove my mother's marriage? Junius Powell, will you die with this secret on your lips?"

"Junius Powell!" he laughed, turning and facing the beautiful girl. "Why don't you go and ask the woman in whose clutches you were when Logan found you. She knows."

"Heavens! that woman?" cried Nelly. "Why, that person is Juanita. She took me from Mesquite, and said she would kill the person who stole me from her."

"Well, didn't she, girl? You know how Logan died."

Nelly Nevins was pushed gently back by the guards, and stood for a moment looking at the prisoner, white-faced and undecided.

Suddenly the report of a fire-arm broke the silence that had followed Prince Pedro's last

word, and those who looked toward the hills saw a puff of pale smoke rising skyward.

At the same time, the form of Prince Pedro reeled and fell from the grip of his executioners.

"It is too late. His lips are sealed forever!" cried the half-fainting girl.

"I've been suspecting that the unexpected would happen before we war through with this job," said Joe Bundy. "It generally does, eh, Red Hawk?"

The young Apache was looking at an object now seen by every one, for Juanita had left her place of concealment, and was walking toward the border court.

"It is the witch of the hills!" went from lip to lip. "It is Juanita."

The woman strode on until she stood before the borderers, when, after a glance at the figure stiffening on the grass, she came toward Nelly.

"I heard you say that the secret was lost forever," she said, addressing the horrified and speechless girl. "Let me tell you what the lips of that man would not reveal. The iron box he carried to this country has been found—"

"What, art thou the person who robbed the thicket whar Red Hawk an' I hid it?" cried Joe Bundy. "I told the young red that the foot-track looked like a woman's. So it was yours, eh?"

"It was mine. I found the box and managed to open it. The papers it contained are in my possession. They remove the stain that has rested so long on my life. They tell the world that I was legally married to Nevins; that he was innocent of the crime for which he suffered the tortures of a hundred deaths. They tell how I was wrongfully persecuted by the man called Powell, but who, fleeing to this land, became Prince Pedro, and who lost the iron box, forgetting that some internal convulsion of nature changed the interior of the Twin Caves where he hid it."

"I took the vengeance that belonged to no one but me," continued Juanita, turning to Mustang Merle. "I swore that I would some day pay him back. I have done so. And now if the child of my heart will come to the arms that have longed for her these many years, I will give her the kiss of a vindicated mother?"

The hands of the speaker were outstretched toward Nelly; there was a loud cry and the young girl rushed forward to be folded to Juanita's bosom.

It was all over. Mustang Merle's war-trail was ended, and that night the old ranch saw a scene of rejoicing. The War Saddles were no more. Their leader had paid the penalty of crime and would never again curse the beautiful border.

Nelly, of course, became the wife of Larry Blair, and at the wedding which took place soon after the death of Prince Pedro, or Junius Powell, Joe Bundy renewed his promise to bequeath to Red Hawk all his estate for having found a way out of the bill after the explosion of the bandit's mine, "provided I remain the last of the Bundys an' thar's any estate left when I come ter shuffle off this mortal coil," for this was the proviso with which the old scout ended his remark.

THE END.

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